

Sandwiching in History Tour

National Old Line Insurance Building

501 Woodlane Dr., Little Rock, AR

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By Mason Toms



Hello everyone, my name is Mason Toms and I work at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, which is a division of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Thank you for coming and welcome to the National Old Line Insurance Company Building. Today's tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you are interested. One quick note before we start. Next month's tour has been moved from the Matthews-Story House to Lamar Porter Field at 3200 W. 7th Street in Little Rock. A tree fell on the house

and repairs will not be complete in time for the tour. Now on with the regular scheduled program.

Originally constructed in 1954, the National Old Line Insurance Company Building by Yandell Johnson is regarded as the largest and one of the best examples of International Style architecture in the state. Though built as a private office building, it is now home to a series of State offices and is sometimes referred to as the 501 Building, due to its address at 501 Woodlane.

The Area

This area was originally outside of the town of Little Rock that was platted in 1821, which ended roughly around State Street. However, by 1835 when Little Rock became a city it was the western edge. Even though this area was part of the city, there really was not much development here for many years. When the old State Penitentiary was constructed in 1842, there were only a few houses scattered around the area. It wasn't until the late 1880s that any kind of real development occurred. The 1897 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, which was the first to extend far enough to include this area, showed that there were several homes of various sizes. The half a block that the National Old Line Insurance Company Building currently occupies had five houses on it, with an additional seven houses along the east half of the block along Victory Street. You would not think that the land adjacent to the State Penitentiary would be very desirable; however, the general expansion of the city meant that all build-able land was being used despite how unfortunate the neighbors might be.

The status of the area significantly improved in 1899 when the Arkansas State Legislature approved the demolition of the State Penitentiary and the construction of a new Capitol Building on the site, which was completed in 1915. However, the new Capitol Building did not seem to make this block any more desirable than it had previously been. In fact, the number of buildings on the block never grew beyond the amount that was present on the 1897 Sanborn Map. By 1939 this half block was home to only four buildings, three houses and a duplex. Similarly, the Victory Street lots had reduced from seven houses on six lots to a single house, a quad-plex, and two apartment buildings. The makeup of the block did not change much between 1939 and 1950, with the exception of the construction of a Lodge Hall on the southwest corner of Victory and Capitol. However, by 1951, when the National Old Line Insurance Company purchased the western half of the block only two houses were still standing. In 1952, these two houses were demolished to make way for the company's new building that exists today.

As a fun aside, Woodlane Drive has gone through some interesting name changes. The street's original name was Cove Street because the northern end of it terminated at the cove of Rose Bayou, what is now called Rose Creek or Capitol Drain. In 1929 the street was renamed Wood Lane, two words, in honor of Arkansas Supreme Court Justice Carroll D. Wood, who served from 1893 until 1929 after a seven years as a circuit court judge. However, at some point between 1939 and 1950, a cartographer mistakenly transcribed the name as Woodlane, one word, and it has remained that way ever since.

National Old Line Insurance Company

The National Old Line Insurance Company was founded on March 12, 1926, and was one of the first occupants in the newly completed Donaghey Building at the corner of Main and Seventh Streets. The company was born out of the idea that a local, Arkansas-based insurance company could and would better understand the needs of Arkansas families and be better able to service them. The National Old Line Insurance was limited to an issue of only 2,000 policies when it was first created to ensure a stable foundation for the company and to prevent it from expanding beyond its means too quickly. The insurance field at the time was a very conservative one. In fact, as a later president remarked “to call an insurance company 'forward thinking' in 1926 was almost an insult.” W.F. Ault, the founder and first president of the company, described the company as “conservative enough to be safe yet progressive enough to be successful.” This statement seemed to be true as the company grew quickly and became one of the largest life insurers in the state within only fifteen months. The growth allowed the company to expand beyond Arkansas into Mississippi by 1929; however, the company's success was not immune to the effects of the Great Depression. Due to the company's conservative practices, they were able to weather the years of meager profits, when so many other insurers went under. Much of this was due to one salesman, William E. Darby. From 1930 to 1935, Darby was the sole producer of business for the company and managed to sell enough policies during the height of the Depression to keep the company afloat. As a reward for his hard work, Darby was promoted to President of the National Old Line Insurance Company in 1945.

By the time Darby took over leadership, the company had already expanded into Louisiana and Alabama, giving them a four state coverage. Due to the growth, they

were in need of more space. In 1946, the National Old Line Insurance Company moved out of the Donaghey Building and into the historic Solomon Gans House at 1010 W. 3rd Street. The following decade was one of even greater growth for the company. The total value of insurance policies by the company grew from eleven million in 1945 to 100 million by 1953, the operating territory grew to cover eighteen states, sales agents grew from four to 265, and the office staff grew from seven to seventy-three. This enormous growth required even more space, which led Darby to the conclusion that they needed a building of their own that also projected the reliability and progressive ideals of the company. The result was the Modernist structure we have today.

In 1960, National Old Line Insurance Company merged with National Equity Life Insurance Company. The result of this union was a thirty-state coverage and over a half a billion dollars in insurance policy value. By 1961, the company had more a 400 agents and an office staff of 200. This sudden growth catapulted the company into the top ten percent of American life insurance companies in the country. The company continued to prosper in the coming years and they achieved their first billion in insurance policies in January of 1969, their second billion in 1971, and their third billion in 1975, just in time for their golden anniversary.

The size and success of the company had made it a force to be reckoned with in the insurance world, which led to it being bought by the international insurance company Ennia in 1982. A year later Ennia and another international insurance powerhouse, AGO, merged to create AEGON Insurance Company and National Old Line Insurance was finally dissolved. AEGON Insurance Company continued to own the building and had offices here until 1997 when the building was sold to the Arkansas

Teachers Retirement System. A few years later, the Arkansas Building Authority purchased the building and moved their offices into it. This agency, now part of the Department of Finance and Administration, oversees the maintenance and care of most state owned properties. The Arkansas Building Authority, now the Division of Building, still has offices here but rents out most of the building to various other state agencies and entities.

The Architect

Joseph Yandell Johnson was born in St. Louis, MO, on October 1, 1911, to parents Joseph Yandell and Bertha Johnson. He graduated from high school in 1928, and decided to stay local for college, enrolling in the architecture program at Washington University in St. Louis. It was during his college years that he met his wife Mary Pipkin, who was also an architecture student. They were married in 1931 and two years later, they graduated with Bachelor's degrees in Architecture. In 1934, Johnson completed his Master's Degree in Architecture.

In 1936, Johnson received the Harrison Steedman Traveling Fellowship to study affordable housing designs in Europe; however, the trip also enabled him to explore the Modernist works of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Alvar Aalto in person. After his return, Johnson worked for the National Park Service to design structures for the Federal Recreation Demonstration Area at Cuiver River in Missouri. Around 1937, Johnson moved to Jonesboro, AR, to partner with architect Elmer A. Stuck, designer of the Craighead County Courthouse, to create the firm of Stuck & Johnson, but the partnership was short lived. In 1939, he took a position as an

architectural reviewer for the Federal Housing Administration until 1942 when the United States entered the war. During World War II Johnson served in the U.S. Navy as a photo interpreter in the Solomon Islands. After the war, Johnson returned to Arkansas where he and his wife started a private practice in Little Rock, which lasted for twenty-one years.

From 1946 to 1967, Johnson designed over 385 buildings in Arkansas from his office in a renovated 1889 house at 113 E. Ninth Street in Little Rock, which was demolished in 2016. The bulk of Johnson's work was composed of residences, including three houses for himself and two large subdivision projects, the Meadow Cliff neighborhood in Little Rock and the Miramar neighborhood in Pine Bluff. However, he also designed a number of commercial buildings, a few churches, a couple of clinics, and at least one fire station. In fact, he designed a building for another insurance agency, the Murdock Acceptance Company, in 1951 just around the corner and down the street from here at 6th and Cross Streets. Another Johnson design, the Rogers-Wickard Clinic, once stood at the corner of 7th and M.L.K., where the Department of Finance and Administration's parking lot is currently located. Nevertheless, it was his design for the National Old Line Insurance Company that was his most well-known and influential design.

Johnson's relationship with the National Old Line Insurance Company began in 1946 when he designed the first of two additions to rear of the Solomon Gans House at 1010 W. 3rd Street. In 1951 the company once again found itself out of room and decided to construct a new building to house its rapidly expanding operations. Then president, William E. Darby, chose Yandell Johnson as the architect for the project. A

new building for the company was completed in 1954, but by 1961, the company was in need of space again, and an addition to the building was completed in 1965 that created the building you see today.

In 1967, Johnson was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. That same year, he decided to close his private practice and go work at the prestigious firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell, Carter & Neyland, Inc., now known as the Cromwell Firm. He would stay there until 1970 when he moved over to one of the other prominent Little Rock firms Erhart, Eichenbaum, Rauch, Blass & Chilcote, where he stayed until his final retirement in 1978. Yandell Johnson passed away in 2000 at the age of 89.

The Architecture

As I mentioned earlier the National Old Line Insurance Company Building is an example of International Style architecture. The name was derived from the idea that an International Style building could be built anywhere in the world and still be functional and comfortable for its inhabitants. The name entered the popular consciousness when Phillip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock created an exhibition in 1932 at the Museum of Modern Art, which featured photos and drawings of “modern” buildings from 15 countries, including the United States that exemplified the movement. The exhibition was an effort to raise awareness and increase popularity of the new, “modern” forms of architecture. The National Old Line Insurance building is a picture-perfect example of International Style architecture, which was characterized by box-like structures with little or no ornament, flat roofs, ribbon windows, and cantilevered sunshades or awnings. There was also a general smoothness to the exteriors and an overall horizontal feel to

the buildings, a distinct contrast to the earlier, vertical Art Deco buildings. Johnson said that the horizontality achieved by the aqua ribbon windows helped the building to feel shorter and not be as obtrusive to the surrounding area. The building is clad in Alabama limestone, which was chosen to compliment the Arkansas and Indiana limestone used on the Capitol Building. The International Style was the most common form of Mid-Century Modern architecture due to its reliance on mass produced, modular wall systems, which often made the designs cheaper to build. A factor that Johnson cited when he discussed his design for the building in 1998 article in the *Pulaski County Historical Review*.

However, according to Johnson, the building was not designed in a particular architectural style at all. As he said:

“To me, there is less of the ‘lessness’ of [the International] style, and I prefer to call it an example of the ‘Modern’ style...However, the building was not designed to fit into a style category. It happened in its day. It is one example of what one architect thought was a solution to a client’s particular needs. Buildings are built with the materials and technologies available at the time and by architects who have accumulated their ideas and design philosophies from all that they have been taught, observed, or concluded up to the time the buildings are designed. With our training and experience, we hope that the result will be pleasing to the observer and the occupants.”

Johnson’s sentiments were common among Modern architects of time because Modern architecture was a rebellion against all of the historicized and revivalist styles of the first

half of the twentieth century. This is why many architects of this period regarded “style” as a bad word and generally resisted attempts to group Mid-Century Modern architecture into stylistic categories.

The building you see today is the product of two separate building phases. The initial building, completed in 1954, was roughly half of what you see, and included the northern tower and lower three levels of the center section. The north tower featured a penthouse apartment on the top and the only known example of a “smoke proof tower” in the state, which is an enclosed fire escape staircase that is accessible only from an exterior balcony. It resulted from a short-lived building code requirement that was changed shortly after the original building’s completion. The second phase of the building was completed in 1965 and included the upper four floors of the center section and the southern tower, which had an additional basement level. Interestingly Johnson designed both phases at the same time to ensure a seamless connection between the two.

Aside from the “smoke proof” stair tower the National Old Line Insurance Company Building features a couple of other unique elements. The first of which is that it was the largest welded steel structure in the state when it was fully completed in 1965. The other more bizarre feature is the presence of female urinals in the women’s restrooms. The unique plumbing fixture was created and marketed by American Standard Company around 1950; however, they never really caught on and were discontinued in 1970. There is one surviving female urinal in the basement ladies’ room on the north end, and if you are interested, I have been told that they still have a copy of the instruction pamphlet for it.

We are now going to move inside to continue the tour. We are entering the building through the original main entrance, which is rarely used due to accessibility concerns. Pay attention to the marble sign panel and original tile floors, as well as the decorative metal grillwork on the entrance to Building Authority's offices. We will be continuing the tour up to the sixth floor. Feel free to use the elevator banks at either end of the building to get up there. Some people will be at each end to assist you. Please gather in the large conference room once you are up there.

Sixth Floor

Where we are currently standing was originally about forty feet up in the air when the building was first completed. The thick wall on the far side of the small conference room was the end of the sixth floor at that time and the only thing up here was the penthouse apartment. The apartment included three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a small kitchen, and a large living room with wet bar. It appears that the penthouse apartment was included in the design as a place to lodge and entertain prominent clients, instead of being a residence. The first people to stay in the penthouse apartment for a prolonged period was Winthrop Rockefeller and his family when he was first elected governor of Arkansas. They lived here for about a year between 1967-1968 while renovation and updates were being done to the Governor's Mansion. Within a few days of the Rockefellers, moving out three female legislators took up residence in the penthouse. Vada Sheid of Baxter County, Dorathy Allen of Monroe County, and Bernice Kizer of Sebastian County lived here until 1974, when Bernice Kizer moved out and Representative L.L. Bryan and his wife Evelyn of Pope County moved in. The group remained in the penthouse until the late 1970s, when the space became vacant. While

the apartment was being rented out as a residence, the center section and southern end were being used as office space. After the legislators moved out, the penthouse apartment became something like a breakroom for the various offices in the building. Sometime in the 1990s, the sixth floor became vacant all together and remained that way for almost twenty years.

In 2013, the Arkansas State University System was looking for a location to house their Little Rock offices that would be close to the Capitol. When they toured the empty sixth floor, they could see that the space would a great deal of work due to the prolonged vacancy, but they the potential in the place. They leased the space and hired the Cromwell Firm to renovate the floor to better suit their needs, this included reorganizing the former penthouse apartment into a reception area and offices for the ASU President, Executive Vice President, and Vice President of University Relations. Additionally they changed the long central corridor of offices into two conference rooms and a catering kitchen. The renovations were completed in late 2014 and since then the ASU System has been gracious host to numerous events and functions in their remarkable space.

I hope you have enjoyed today's tour I will be around to answer any questions you might have about the building. Be sure to take in the best views in the city from terraces and windows and also check out the honorary Mike Beebe Office in the southwest corner of this floor. The next Sandwiching in History will be on September 7th at the Lamar Porter Field at 3200 West 7th Street in Little Rock, and also join us for our next Walks Through History Tour on September 15th in historic downtown Osceola, AR. Thank you for coming and have a great weekend.