

**Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
Sandwiching in History Tour of Curran Hall
December 7, 2018**



Written and Presented by David Collins

Hello and welcome to the December 2018 Sandwiching in History Tour of Curran Hall. My name is David Collins and I am a graduate assistant with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, so I can't be certain since I'm not that important, but I think I speak on behalf of the Program when I say that we truly appreciate you all coming and showing an interest in local historic properties. Before we get started, I'd like to make some special mentions. First of all, thanks to the Little Rock Visitor's Center for allowing us to tour the building. I also want to thank Patricia Blick and Shelle Stormoe at the Quapaw Quarter Association for providing information and images for the tour. Thanks to Jim Rule, who has conducted integral research in the life of this property and its residents. Finally, thank you to

the Pulaski County Master Gardeners for their brilliant work in helping to preserve a historic image of the property.

Curran Hall is almost as old as the state of Arkansas itself and was built during a time when Little Rock was gaining many new high-profile public buildings and houses. It remained a private residence until the 1990s and has been home to only a few families since it was built. Construction began in 1842, the same year the Old State House was officially completed. Tradition holds that the designer of the Old State House, Gideon Shryock, also designed Curran Hall. However, there is no significant evidence indicating that this is true.

In any case, it built in the Greek Revival style that was popular at the time for government buildings and grand residences. It was to have a symmetrical front façade with Doric columns supporting a low-hipped roof and a central portico. The house was built of brick and rested on a raised foundation. Despite some extensive renovations and additions over the years, the interior of the house has remained fairly true to its original layout, which was a symmetrical plan with a central hall and four large rooms. Each room had its own fireplace with classically designed mantels.

Colonel Ebenezer Walters, a prominent business and military man in Little Rock, oversaw the construction of the house, which originally consumed two entire city blocks. He was married to Mary Starbuck in August of 1841, and the house was meant to be the couple's ideal residence on the outskirts of the burgeoning city. Coincidentally and sadly for the Colonel, Mary died during childbirth in July of 1843, the same month the house was completed. With no family to fill the new home, Colonel Walters left the building in the care of a trust and moved to Texas, where tensions were mounting between Mexico and the United States. Ultimately, he died shortly after the end of the Mexican-American War in 1849 and was buried next to Mary in Mount Holly Cemetery.

The unoccupied home was soon sold to David J. Baldwin, a respected attorney in Little Rock, where he lived with his wife for six years. In 1849, Baldwin sold the house and, in 1850, briefly became the mayor of Little Rock after Roswell Beebe resigned the office. James Moore Curran, another successful Little Rock lawyer, bought the house from Baldwin as a gift for his new wife, Sophia Fulton Curran.

The couple lived together in the home over the next five years and had two children; but as Sophia was pregnant with their third child in 1854, James Curran became ill on a business trip and suddenly died. The next year, Sophia married her late husband's law partner, George Watkins, who was himself a recent widower. They blended their families and all moved into the house, renovating some parts of it to accommodate the larger family. This included the front porch, which was enlarged to span the entire front of the house. They lived together in the Curran house until the early 1860s, when they fled the city in the wake of the Civil War.

After the family left, the house stood vacant for some time before Jacob Frolich bought it from the Curran family sometime after the war. Frolich was an outspoken anti-Reconstructionist, Ku Klux Klan member, and Democratic newspaper printer. He began living in the Curran house during the height of Reconstruction in Arkansas, in close vicinity to the Republican government. In 1868, Frolich was part of a group of people warranted for the murder of Albert Parker, a Reconstructionist government agent. This caused him to flee to Canada for a short while until he could return and stand trial. He was ultimately acquitted, but remained suspicious of the government and installed trapdoors in areas of the house for easier escape. In 1874, the Reconstructionist government in Arkansas was ousted and Frolich was promptly elected to the state legislature and later to the office of Secretary of State.

In 1881, during his three-term stint as Secretary of State, Frolich sold the Curran house to Mary Eliza Bell, the daughter of another prominent Democratic printer in Little Rock—William E. Woodruff. At the time, Bell was a widow with four daughters. After purchasing the house, she had it restored and made additions to the southeast corner and the rear porch in the late 1890s in order to accommodate her daughters. Ultimately, the house remained in Bell's family for over a century. After Mary died in 1911, her daughters Hattie and Fannie lived in the house for a time. Another of her daughters, Eva, married Francis Reynolds and they had a daughter name Averell, who inherited ownership of the house in 1955 after Fannie died.

Averell lived in the house until 1993, much of that time being spent with her husband, Fred, and two children, Fred and Joan. By the early 1990s, the house was in a very poor state, but Tate was an obstinate spirit and was proud of her family's ability to hold onto the place.

She had to be persuaded heavily to give up the grand house that provided a home to her family for such a long time and that had such immense significance in the city. In 2013 Jim Rule conducted oral history interviews with people who knew Ms. Tate and helped in her last days in the house. In his interview with Rule, long-time director of Historic Arkansas Museum, Bill Worthen, noted that the house was gradually crumbling on the east side by the early 1990s. Inside the house, Tate had collected items and papers over the years, which were stacked in boxes in a way that created small paths through the corridors of the house.

Kathy Worthen knew Tate through Bill Worthen and through Tate's participation in local social events at Historic Arkansas Museum. She recalled the state of Ms. Tate's house, saying, "She had no bathroom facilities really. There were bugs and rats ... everywhere and she had this huge dog [that] was jumping up and down on her. I finally just looked at her and said, 'Averell, you cannot stay here.'" Still, Tate wanted to keep the house ... and the dog, despite it outweighing her.

Tate was beginning to ail at the time and her husband had died some years before, so she could not properly care for the house on her own (or the dog for that matter). Though she loved to share its history, she was always worried about what would be done to the historic home if she gave it up. However, after some persistence by the few people who were in contact with her, she agreed to leave and stay in a local apartment. She also allowed her 150-pound dog to be adopted. Tate continued attending local preservation events and history courses at UALR into her 90s. She even came back with Richard Butler to tour Curran Hall as its renovations were being completed. In January of 2003, only a few weeks after this final visit, Averell Tate died. However, by simply living in the house and caring for it, she helped preserve it for citizens and visitors of Little Rock to enjoy for years to come.

The house was placed in a trust and, for three years, it remained in doubt what would become of it. Bill Worthen mentioned that the west wall was on the verge of collapse by that point, but it was narrowly saved with some emergency fundraising.

By late 1995, those responsible for the house were optioning to have it demolished. Preservationists within the city knew what the house meant as one of the few still-standing antebellum structures. An October 1995 editorial in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* noted in a wry tone that “The Walters-Curran-Bell House (Curran Hall) may soon go the way of the Alexander George House, which is no longer a house but a parking lot ... What’s 152 years of history? Maybe somebody could put up a new burger joint on the site.” Many people who knew Averell Tate’s wishes for the house wanted to save it, so a task force of the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission worked with the city of Little Rock, which assumed control of the house until someone could invest in its renovation.

Shortly after, the Little Rock Visitor Center Foundation purchased the house and planned to use it as a fixture for years to come in Little Rock. On May 30, 1997, the Department of Arkansas Heritage and the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission hosted a reception to tour the house and promote the plan to turn it into the city’s Visitors Center.

A promotional pamphlet for the event stated, “Because of its historic importance and its prime location, just a half block off Interstate 30 at the Sixth Street exit in downtown Little Roc, Curran Hall is a wonderful candidate for a new and exciting life as a combination visitor information center, historic home, and mayor’s reception hall.” The Visitor Center Foundation began a six-year, \$1.4 million renovation project on Curran Hall, the progress of which you can see in many of the photos here. A link to some of those photos is also available on the Curran Hall website. At the time of the renovation, much of the interior was intact from the nineteenth century, but as you can see was updated to the standard of a modern public facility. Later, in 2012, the floorcloth was installed, and is meant to reflect a popular nineteenth century style.

The Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau took over the operation of the new Visitors Center, which opened to the public on May 18, 2002. The LRCVB continued its operation of the property until 2006. The cost of maintaining the facilities became too much for the organization, and a few other organizations within the city began to form proposals in 2006 to take over operations. The Quapaw Quarter Association ultimately assumed operation of the site at that time and continues to manage it, with its offices on the rear addition to the original house. Finally, the Pulaski County Master Gardeners maintain the grounds

of Curran Hall, known as the Marjem Ward Jackson Historic Arkansas Gardens, with a mission to use indigenous flora from the period of the home's beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century.

Curran Hall was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 1, 1976. Though it almost did not survive, the building now stands as the only antebellum house in Little Rock that is regularly available to public access. That is primarily due to the fact that it stayed in one historic Little Rock family for over century, the last member of which, despite her personal attachment to the structure, gave it a chance for new life.

I have one final note on behalf of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program and its public outreach. We have been working on a Sandwiching in History program for 2019, which we are, as always, very excited to present to all of you. So please look for our announcements or contact our office for more information on those properties.

Our next tour will be on Friday, January 4 at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, which is located at 6401 W. 32nd Street in Little Rock.

That will conclude the history on Curran Hall today. Please feel free to tour the center and the grounds, and thank you all so much for being here and supporting our historic properties.