



ARKANSAS HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Sandwiching In History Tour Baker House, North Little Rock

March 6, 2020

By: Mollie Waldon



Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Mollie Waldon, and I am a Graduate Assistant of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the March 2020 Sandwiching in History tour of the Baker House. This tour is worth one hour of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects, if you would like to receive this credit, please see one of my colleagues after the tour to complete a short survey.

Argenta- Railroad Boom Town

The town of Argenta was platted in 1866, its name derived from the Latin word for silver, referring to the Kellogg lead and silver mine located just about ten miles north of Argenta. In 1870, before the railroads reached central Arkansas, the majority of the small north shore population was African American and included many former slaves.¹ Most economic

¹ Bradburn, Cary, North Little Rock History Commission. "North Little Rock (Pulaski County)." *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/north-little-rock-pulaski-county-973/>.

opportunities in the area were connected to natural resource extraction and ferry work on the Arkansas River for passengers and cargo. In 1869 the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad began construction of a line with a freight yard and depot around present-day 4th and Poplar streets in Argenta. In 1870 the Cairo and Fulton Railroad began construction of its line around present-day 11th and Main streets. In 1871 the Memphis and Little Rock Railroad connected Argenta to Memphis. The Baring Cross Bridge was completed in 1873 and connected the Cairo and Fulton rails that operated on either side of the Arkansas River. Before the bridge was completed cargo had to cross the Arkansas River by ferries which were slow due to limited space and the time of loading and unloading to either side. There was also a risk of cargo loss by common ferry accidents. The Arkansas River was notoriously shallow throughout much of its course and frequently sunken cargo and steamboats created dangerous submerged hulks and snags. In 1872 at least 117 steamboats had succumbed to the Arkansas River. The Baring Cross Bridge played a significant role in improving transportation efficiency for cargo and also helped connect the growing communities of Argenta and Little Rock. In 1874 the Cairo and Fulton Railroad and the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad were completed. With the completion of the three railroads here, Argenta was able to boom for decades as a major railroad hub and thriving community. The population on the north shore would grow to become the second-largest population in the state until the 1940s.²

Annexation

Argenta was largely a working-class town and attracted many European immigrants with its railroad employment opportunities, as well as at the local mines, mills, and factories connected to the transportation industry. Stores, saloons, and inns concentrated around the central railroad hub of town and neighborhoods were within walking distance of these businesses as well. The ideal climate and central shipping location led J. W. Vestal to relocate his growing Vestal Nursery business near Baring Cross Bridge. The major success of this business was majorly responsible for the City of Little Rock's unsuccessful attempt to annex the Vestal property in 1891. This action helped spur Argenta to become politically incorporated separate from Little Rock, since in 1890 it was forcibly annexed as Little Rock's Eighth Ward. In 1901 the town of North Little Rock was formed as part of a plan led by local politician and businessman William C. Faucette to reclaim Argenta from Little Rock. The passage of the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge bill by northside businessmen working with Faucette ended up giving North Little Rock the disguised ability to reclaim Argenta into North Little Rock in 1904.³

² Clay, Floyd M. *A History of the Little Rock District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1881-1979*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Offices, 1979). Page 5.; Hodge, Michael. "Railroads." *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/railroads-1185/>.; Bradburn, Cary. North Little Rock History Commission. "Argenta Historic District." *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/argenta-historic-district-7481/>.

³ *Ibid.* "North Little Rock (Pulaski County)."

The Jeweler and the Jockey

For years the history of the house was muddled in local legend involving a mix-up between the identities of two real residents of Argenta. The story was that the original owner of the Baker was a famous black jockey from England named Albert E. Colburn who built the home for his family with money from his winnings, but his time in the house was cut short due to surrounding racial prejudice in the neighborhood. The truth is that there was a famous black jockey from England in Argenta around the time, but he didn't build the Baker. In 1895 he built what has become known as the Engelberger House at 2105 North Maple Street, the only other surviving Queen Anne style home in North Little Rock. His name was Alonzo "Lonnie" Clayton and he became famous by becoming the youngest person to win the Kentucky Derby in 1892 at the age of about fifteen or sixteen. The first owner of the Baker was Albert E. Colburn, but he was a white watch maker. The mix-up possibly happened from the construction dates of the Engelberger house matching that of Colburn's business construction nearby. One other reported local legend surrounding the Baker was that it was built by a black doctor from London who was building the large house for his fiancé. But his fiancé broke off the engagement shortly after the house's completion, leading him to sell the home that he planned to move into with his future wife. Based on historic census entries, city directory pages, and land deeds, the house was definitely first owned by Albert E. Colburn.⁴

Albert E. Colburn

The construction of the Baker House began in 1896 and was finished in 1897 by owner Albert E. Colburn. Colburn was a jeweler and watch repairman from New Hampshire that lived in Argenta, Arkansas, with his wife Estelle and three children. His business was on the same block as his newly constructed house, leading locals to refer to the area as "Colburn's block."⁵ While he was a jeweler by trade, Colburn also owned a drugstore within the same building on the corner of West 5th and Washington Avenue. In 1897 the house had twenty-five electric lights installed, as well as a low iron fence surrounding the property. That spring he welcomed two boarders, McDonald and Bates, to his house that worked as Brakemen for the railroads.⁶ That same year Colburn sued the Arkansas Pump and Pipe Company for alleged water damage to his home with an estimated \$3,000 worth of damages caused by plumbing leaks, about \$90,000 today.⁷ A contract for an addition that is the current kitchen area began in 1896 but it wasn't completed until 1898.⁸

⁴ Silva, Rachel. "North Little Rock's Historic Engelberger House." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. July 2010.; Proof of Colburn's original ownership can be seen in city directory pages from 1896-97, as well as in various local newspaper articles, and land deeds.

⁵ "North Side Gossip." *Daily Arkansas Gazette*. February 15, 1895. Page 3.

⁶ *Daily Arkansas Gazette*. May 11, 1897. Page 6.; "" April 25, 1897. Page 10.

⁷ *Daily Arkansas Gazette*. July 21, 1897. Page 8.; Webster, Ian. "Inflation Calculator." Official Data Foundation (2020). Alioth LLC. officialdata.org/us/inflation/1897?amount=3000.

⁸ *Daily Arkansas Gazette*. May 27, 1896. Page 4.; *Arkansas Democrat*. April 30, 1898. Page 5.; Sanborn Map Company, Insurance Maps of Little Rock, Arkansas, 1897. Image 64.

On Sunday March 3rd of 1901 at about 1:30 a.m., a fire broke out that destroyed Colburn's business building as well as others nearby. Part of Colburn's house which was behind the store was also damaged. He suffered property loss of about \$12,500, which would be about the equivalent of \$379,369 today. The only goods in his store that survived were those stored in a safe but even those were damaged from the fire. The insurance only covered about a fourth of the loss. A young employee of Colburn named George Ludwig, a 23-year-old, suffered serious injuries when he tried to save the property. When he burst open the rear door of the store, he created a current of air that caused a harsh wave of flame to lash out at him. He suffered significant burns to his head, face, and hands. It was predicted that he may lose both of his eyes and hands, but days after the accident, his physician thought he wouldn't lose anything, only be disfigured by the burns for the rest of his life.⁹ Not long after the fire, Colburn sold his business and home. The Davidson family became the new owners of the house in 1901.¹⁰

The Davidson Family

While the house looks like a single-family mansion, for much of its time it has been used as a boarding house. The working-class Davidson family who next owned the property did live in it themselves, but they rented out the upper level rooms to many men who worked with the railroads or were firefighters. George Porter Davidson himself also worked as an engineer for the Missouri Pacific Railroad in Argenta. He emigrated to Arkansas from his family's farm in Georgia to work. While he worked eleven-hour days outside the house, his wife Katie Davidson kept the house, renters, and four kids in order as well as handling the washing, canning, cooking, and sewing.

During the family's first year in the house, Katie Davidson contracted smallpox which led the whole family to be quarantined at home for six weeks. Two to three men usually rented a room together, so the house may have had as many as twenty boarders living in it at times. The house's second staircase and side door kept foot traffic away from the family space of the house which the men would usually only enter to pay their rent.

Katie Davidson reportedly didn't want to buy the house unless it came with the Colburn's upright rosewood piano and the painting that hung above it in the parlor called "Hiawatha's Wooing," which was an illustration of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's narrative poem. In the doorways of the parlors were there long draperies called portieres beneath the glass transoms. When the Davidson's lived there they cooked on a coal stove with a large range. They did have

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4004lm.g002851897/?sp=64&r=0.006,0.117,0.524,0.333,0.;> "" 1913. Image 103.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4004lm.g00285191302/?sp=103&r=-0.045,0.739,0.517,0.37,0.>

⁹ "Drug Store Burned." *Arkansas Democrat*. March 4, 1901. Page 7. "Serious Fire at the Store of A. E. Colburn." *Jewelers' Circular-Weekly*, March 13, 1901.; *ibid.* Webster.

¹⁰ *The Jewelers' Circular-Weekly*, July 17, 1901.; Pulaski County Deed Index of 1819-1906. Book 66, page 90.

running water as well. Daughter Marguerite Davidson Mullins recalled how the lighting fixtures in the house were gas lit. The Davidson's sold the house to the Baker family in 1916.¹¹

The Baker Family

The Baker House got its name from the family that owned it the longest after 1916. It was bought by Cadmus J. Baker who moved in with his wife Annie Baker and three children. Baker was the North Little Rock school superintendent from 1904 to 1906 and afterwards he got into real estate and became a loan broker on Washington Avenue, the business center of North Little Rock, until 1939. Census records show that C. J. Baker, like the Davidson's, rented out much of the house. One of C. J. Baker's daughters Lillian Baker Lewis lived in the house from 1916 to 1937 and returned to live in it from 1969 to 1977 before selling it to Dr. Hampton Roy Senior.¹²

Dr. Frederick Hampton Roy Sr.

The Baker had seen better days by the time Dr. Frederick Hampton Roy Sr. purchased it in 1977, but he put in significant work to restore the house and even got it listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. Dr. Roy Sr. is a renowned ophthalmologist from Little Rock with a passion for historic preservation and local history. He pioneered new types of cataract surgeries and other eye treatments. He has also authored many books in his medical profession, as well as some on local histories and architecture such as *Charles Thompson and Associates, Arkansas Architects 1885-1937*, and *How We Lived--Little Rock as an American City*.¹³

After completing restoration work on a Little Rock house designed by Charles L. Thompson, Dr. Roy Sr. got to work on the Baker, doing major updates on its guts with new plumbing and electrical wiring. There was a lot of termite damage to the exterior wood, the cone shaped tower roof was gone after perishing in a fire caused by a lightning strike, and a portion of brick wall and floor around the kitchen had to be replaced since it was sagging. The cone shaped roof had to be rebuilt on the ground and lifted into place by a crane. This current tower roof is actually not as tall as the original. The stained glass window in the front parlor window and its matching glass door to the inside butler's pantry were added by Dr. Roy Sr. based on similar period pieces. His work restoring the house was finished in 1981. When he and his family were removing layers of paint and varnish from the interior woodwork, they discovered a vast amount of beautiful curly heart pine throughout the house.¹⁴ Around 1986 P. Allen Smith did some

¹¹ Mitchell, Starr. "Former Occupant Shares Baker House Past." *The North Little Rock Times*, March 25, 1982. Page 9B.

¹² "Watching North Little Rock Grow." *The North Little Rock Times* (farm edition?). July 12, 1940.; Callie's notes on the Baker.; *Ibid.* Bradburn.

¹³ Bryant, Jimmy. University of Central Arkansas. "Frederick Hampton Roy Sr. (1937-)." *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/frederick-hampton-roy-sr-7464/>.

¹⁴ Dearing, Jane. "The Baker House: A Restoration Put to Work." Unknown publication. post 1981. Page 9F.

landscaping work for the family after recently returning from his time in England studying landscape architecture and history.¹⁵

Curly Pine

Curly heartwood pine gets its name from its intricate wavy rings that create a holographic effect caused by a rare mutation in certain pine trees. This woodwork is an artefact of the once vast "virgin" longleaf pine savannas of the southeastern United States. Harvesting and milling of the old-growth longleaf pine was made possible on a large scale due to the spread of railroads and advanced milling machinery in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The longleaf pine lumber industry would peak in 1907 when 1.4 billion cubic feet of timber was harvested.¹⁶ This wood would be used in construction throughout the U.S. and even exported to Europe. The curly pattern seen throughout the Baker is said to only occur in about .5 - 1% of longleaf pine trees that are often identified by their very bumpy exterior. Wood that is not plain is typically called figured wood. There are various types of figures, either occurring more naturally in certain species, from burls in tree growth, or emphasized from cutting technique. Figured wood is most often used to create statement pieces or musical instruments, making the extensive use of curly pine throughout the Baker unusual. Either A. E. Colburn or his contractor saw the beauty of many deformed pieces in his lumber batch or sought this particular pattern out for the construction. Inside, the curly heartwood pine can be seen as the baseboards, posts, frames, stairs, railings, and doors. Rather than be cut into the usual intricate molding patterns of the period and style, most of the pieces are in simple shapes with smooth surfaces. This may have been done to either reduce milling costs or to let the curly pattern serve as the main decorative detail throughout the house. Today, this wood can only be found reclaimed from old homes or by recovering timber from river bottoms that snagged and sank during river transportation in late 1800s to early 1900s. It can easily fetch a price of \$30 per square foot.¹⁷

Later History

After Dr. Roy Senior's restoration work on the Baker, the house stayed within his family until it was bought by Jon and Sherry Sanford in 1993 who raised their thirteen children there-- a Baker's dozen.¹⁸ The house changed hands several times with different bed and breakfast business attempts in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Baker was most recently bought by Stacy and Nathan Hamilton and marketed as a boutique hotel, differing from earlier attempts that focused on recreating a Victorian era atmosphere inside. The Hamilton's removed the floral Victorian imitation wallpaper inside, had the floors redone as well as some plumbing updates, and improved the interior lighting. The upstairs rooms have been altered for more modern use,

¹⁵ Richardson, Kate. "A Home Again." *The North Little Rock Times*. December 11, 1986.

¹⁶ Oswalt, et al. "History and Current Condition of Longleaf Pine in the Southern United States." (Asheville, NC: Southern Research Station, 2012). Page 6.

¹⁷ Goodwin Heart Pine. Heartpine.com.

¹⁸ Clark, Melanie. Henderson State University. "Baker House." *Arkansas Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/baker-house-9285/>.

but the curly pine woodwork has been kept everywhere and now serves as the main decor within the upscale minimalistic interior.¹⁹

Victorian Picturesque

Like the boom of early Argenta, the Queen Anne style also flourished from the spread of the railroads in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Industrialization and growing cross-country rail transportation made mass production and standardization of construction parts possible. The growth of the logging industry thanks to the efficiency of railroads for log transportation and advanced milling machinery led to the availability of mass-produced decorative woodwork. Other new materials of the time included wire nails, cheaper windows, and decorative cast metal work.²⁰ Wire nails allowed buildings to break free from simple rectangular forms as a new method of construction took over called “balloon framing.” This replaced the post-and-beam frames that required more time and skill to assemble, since cheaper mass-produced wire nails replaced the need for crafting mortise and tenon connections.²¹

Most Victorian era architectural styles overlapped one another without clear distinctions, unlike the preceding Romantic era’s more differing Greek, Gothic, and Italianate styles. Despite the overlapping of details between the styles of the Victorian era, there are still usually enough distinguishing features to allow for multiple identifications of styles.²² Much of the stylistic overlap is due to most Victorian era houses being designed by homeowners using pattern books rather than project architects. Pattern books, sometimes called “carpenters’ guides,” were catalogues that were sometimes put together by architects at the time that featured a vast array of woodwork, metal work, paneling, shingles, windows, spindlework, floor plans and so on that were either ordered from manufacturers or used as guides for measurements and assembly by the house craftsmen and carpenters. Some even featured color print pages to illustrate ready mixed paint colors, an innovation at the time. Through the latter half of the nineteenth century the number of available pattern books in the U.S. proliferated as printing and shipping became cheaper. It was a time of fast-fashion for houses as the new pattern books encouraged homeowners to keep their homes up to date with current popular styles.²³ One of the earliest pattern books published in this era was Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis’ *Cottage Residences* which was published in 1842. The design aesthetics were pastoral picturesque with cottages of romanticism based on a revival of gothic features. Later books continued the picturesque aesthetic with asymmetrical exterior shapes and a wide variety of texture applications.

¹⁹ Interview with Nathan Hamilton by Mollie Waldon. January 30, 2020.

²⁰ McAlester, Virginia Savage. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018). Page 314.

²¹ Carley, Rachel. *The Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture*. (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1997). Page 127.

²² *Ibid*, McAlester. Page 315.

²³ Roy, Frederick Hampton. *Charles L Thompson and associates: Arkansas architects, 1885-1938*. (August House, 1983). Page 15.

The Queen Anne Style

The Queen Anne style first arrived in the United States at the Philadelphia World Fair of 1876. It was the first official World's Fair in the United States in celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was an international exhibition of art, architecture, business, and innovations. Many buildings were constructed just for the event, including two made by the British government fashioned in an "Old English" revival that the United States began calling the "Queen Anne" style. The widespread publicity of the event led to the art and architecture featured at the World Fair to flow into the mainstream of public fashion. The American Queen Anne style's popularity ran from around the 1880s to the 1910s, reaching its peak in popularity around the 1890s, when the Baker House was built.

The covered porch of the Baker features painted spindled balusters and spandrels, decorative side brackets and projecting brackets, and a spindlework entryway known as a "moongate." Various east Asian garden and architecture features were adopted by European designers and later American styles, such as the moongate from Chinese gardens. A moongate is a circular opening in a garden wall that serves as an entryway as well as a viewing frame for the garden features. While the Baker's moongate is not a circle, it significantly resembles one. The windows and sills on the tower are all curved, and one original curved glass pane still remains on the lower level. The sills and lintels of the windows are stone. The third floor of the tower features patterned shingles. Most are rectangular with the middle strip being diamond shaped. The gables of the house also feature shingles, but in a mix of rectangular and fish scale shapes around the Palladian windows. A photo taken recently after the house was first constructed showed that the shingles on the roof and siding featured colored shingle arrangements in some places. Behind the tower is a cupola at the center of the house that can be reached by the central stairs with windows on all sides and skylight. Originally there was metalwork along the roof ridges called cresting made from iron or copper that resembled a dentil pattern. The point on the tower roof originally had a metal finial also. While there isn't documentation of the original landscaping aside from a few front trees, it may have featured shrub walls, potted plants on the porch or roses from the Vestal Nursery along with the grass yard.

Compared to many other Queen Anne styled homes in the state, the Baker House is fairly tame. Perhaps this is one of the reasons it remains standing today, as the Queen Anne style fell out of fashion shortly after the turn of the century and gained a reputation for being too flamboyant.²⁴ The Baker is a somewhat unusual Queen Anne home due to its symmetry and brick construction with wood only used as decoration. While it also isn't as flashy as other examples of this usually ornate style, it still remains today as a good example of the Queen Anne style as well as a representation of early Argenta.

This concludes the history presentation of the Baker House. Thank you for coming. Our next tour is a *Walk Through History* on March 21st in Lockesburg, meeting at 11 a.m. The tour will

²⁴ Omoto, Sadayoshi. "The Queen Anne Style and Architectural Criticism." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. vol. 23, no. 1 (1964): Pages 29-37. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/988260.

begin at UA Cossatot, Lockesburg High School Gymnasium on 128 East Main Street. The next Sandwiching in History tour will be on April 3rd at noon at the Old Mill in T. R. Pugh Memorial Park, North Little Rock. We also have brochures for all of this year's Sandwiching and Walks Tours. Please be sure to grab one and join us throughout 2020 as we explore more interesting historic sites throughout central Arkansas.