

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Capital Hotel**  
**111 W. Markham, Little Rock**  
**February 1, 2013**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



**Intro**

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of the Capital Hotel! I'd like to thank the wonderful people at the Capital Hotel for allowing us to tour the building today. And I'd like to thank a few people in particular for their help with the tour—

Chuck Magill, marketing director for the Capital Hotel;

Gigi Magill, catering sales manager for the Capital Hotel;

Jim Pfeifer, who was the project architect for the 1983 Cromwell renovation;

And Tom Marr, Rehab Tax Credit Coordinator for the AHPP, who worked with the Capital Hotel management during the building's latest renovation in 2005-2007.

The Capital Hotel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

## Early History

Little Rock's post-Civil War building boom quickly altered the appearance of the city with the construction of new, multi-story, brick commercial buildings and the expansion of the business district to the south of the Arkansas River. Between 1872 and 1873, more than twenty commercial buildings were constructed, one of which was the Denckla Block. In the early 1870s, Judge George C. Watkins, a former Arkansas Attorney General and Chief Justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court, sold the land at the southeast corner of Markham and Louisiana streets to William P. Denckla, a wealthy businessman and railroad mogul from New York. Denckla constructed a 3-story, brick building with a cast-iron façade to house a variety of shops on the first floor, professional offices on the second floor, and gentlemen's apartments on the third floor. Construction began in the spring of 1872 and was completed by the spring of 1873. The building's cast-iron façade was originally manufactured for New York City merchant A. T. Stewart, who planned to build a store of his own, but for some reason his plans never materialized. Denckla was in New York promoting the sale of bonds for construction of the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad and somehow found out about Stewart's cast-iron façade. Denckla purchased the façade and had it shipped to Little Rock.

Denckla's masonry building was constructed with the correct dimensions to receive the cast-iron façade, which was assembled on-site and bolted on piece by piece. The cast-iron was not only a decorative element; it served an important structural purpose as well. Denckla's interest in the building was merely speculative, for he sold the property back to the heirs of Judge Watkins (who died Dec. 7, 1872) soon after the building was completed in Spring 1873.

### *Occupants in 1873*

The **Denckla Block**, as it was then known, had six storefronts along the first floor of its north (front) façade. The middle two storefronts (which now comprise the

hotel lobby) were occupied by P. Raleigh's carpets and furnishing goods for ladies, gents & house.

The storefront just to the west of Raleigh's was occupied by G. W. Lindley, who sold books and stationery, as well as S. H. Timmons, who sold sheet music and musical instruments.

Burrows Bros. Grocers and Tea Dealers was located in the western corner storefront.

One storefront to the east of Raleigh's was Louis Ran's Tobacco, Cigar, Wine & Liquor store.

And the storefront in the far eastern corner was occupied by Morris & Withall, Furriers, Hats & Caps (sign says Hat Emporium in old photo).

The second floor and some of the third floor was occupied by the professional offices of attorneys, civil engineers, physicians, and insurance and real estate agents.

Most of the third floor contained furnished rooms, which were rented out as "gentlemen's apartments" or "bachelor's quarters."

### **The Denckla Block becomes the Capital Hotel**

On the night of December 14, 1876, the Metropolitan Hotel at the northwest corner of Markham and Main streets, along with half of the north side of the 100 block of W. Markham, was destroyed by fire. This left Little Rock without a first-class hotel. Just seven days after the fire, the *Arkansas Gazette* reported that Col. A. G. DeShon (former manager of the Metropolitan) and Maj. John D. Adams would lease the Denckla Block and turn it into a hotel. The Denckla tenants were evicted immediately, and plans were in the works to build a 45' x 60' addition on the building's Louisiana Street side (this brick addition fronted on Louisiana).

Maj. Adams gave Little Rock resident Mrs. Morehead Wright the privilege of naming the new hotel. On December 27, 1876, the *Gazette* printed her response.

"Appreciating the compliment of being asked to name your hotel, I can think of no name more appropriate than "Capital Hotel," as it is a capital

enterprise located in a capital building, which will do honor to the capital of the state, and I trust prove a capital success to yourself and Major DeShon. Respectfully, your friend, Mrs. Morehead Wright.”

The Capital Hotel officially opened on January 21, 1877, and boasted accommodations for eighty guests as well as gas lighting, new carpets and furniture from St. Louis, and a magnetic annunciator in the hotel office. A *Gazette* article (1/20/1877) described the annunciator, saying, “Every arrangement is made for prompt attendance to the wants of occupants of rooms, there being in the office a handsomely framed machine known as a patent magnetic annunciator with figures representing the numbers of rooms; by pressing an ornamental little knob sunk into the side of any room, the annunciator being connected with the room in question by a magnetic wire, immediately indicates with clock-like-hand pointing at the number, the room in which service is desired.” When it opened, the Capital Hotel was compared to the Southern Hotel in St. Louis and the Palmer House in Chicago.

A 3-story, 4-bay-wide addition with brick pilasters on the Louisiana Street side was built between July and November 1877. The hotel restaurant moved into the first floor of the addition in November 1877.

In July 1877 the Southern Express Company moved into the hotel’s western corner storefront at Markham & Louisiana and installed a vault in the building for the safekeeping of valuables and cash.

Indoor plumbing was installed in May 1878, and the following year (1879) a small balcony was added above the hotel’s front entrance (this was more of a balconet; did not extend very far from the building and was not supported by columns). By this time, the Capital Hotel offered standard amenities like a billiard room, bar, barber shop, and restaurant.

Col. DeShon died on February 28, 1884, of a brain tumor at the age of 54. His property was left to his wife, Olive, who sold the Capital Hotel lease and furniture

to Jonathan F. Calef and J. W. DeShon (not a relative of Col. DeShon) for \$28,000 cash. In the mid-1880s, rooms on the European Plan (meals not included) rented from 50 cents to \$1.50 per day, while rooms on the American Plan (meals included) rented from \$2 to \$3 per day. The Capital Hotel was so successful that in the 1880s and 1890s, the second and third floors of the adjacent **German National Bank Building** at the southwest corner of Markham & Main were used for additional hotel rooms. **Sanborn maps from 1886 until 1897** show an iron-clad walkway through the alley to the east of the Capital Hotel and connecting to the back of the bank building.

J. F. Calef made several improvements to the hotel during his tenure, including the installation of electric lights in the fall of 1885 and the **addition of the fourth floor during the winter of 1889 and spring of 1890**. The east, south, and west elevations of the fourth floor were of masonry construction, while the front façade was constructed of wood covered with pressed metal (not cast-iron). This is when the Capital Hotel got its **signature bracketed cornice and decorative parapet**. The 1873 building originally had a cornice with brackets topped by a row of cresting and a central shaped parapet. The shaped parapet was retained and placed at the top of the fourth story (it is no longer extant). Also in 1890, the small iron balcony from 1879 was expanded, and six thin, iron columns were added to support it. Some interior finishes were upgraded with faux graining, fans were installed, and fire escapes were added to the building. Sometime in the 1890s, a 4-story wing was built on the east side of the building, and the 3-story wing on the west side was enlarged to match the new eastern wing. The decorative cornice and parapet was extended to the south on the building's west elevation (the east elevation never had decorative elements because it faced an alley; it is currently exposed because of the demolition of a building to create a parking lot).

### **1908 Renovation**

On August 1, 1908, Henry Franklin Auten and a group of other investors bought the Capital Hotel from the Watkins heirs. Auten, one of the developers of Pulaski

Heights, debated about whether to keep the hotel open or convert the building back to office and retail space. You see, the new Marion Hotel had just opened across the street from the Capital Hotel. But Auten decided to overhaul the hotel at a cost of \$250,000 and call it the New Capital Hotel. Auten wanted to make the **New Capital Hotel** one of the finest in the South. He hired architect George R. Mann to redesign the hotel lobby and first floor storefronts.

George Mann was hired in 1899 to design the Arkansas State Capitol Building and was soon offered other commissions, including the Marion Hotel, the Southern Trust Building, the State Bank Building (later called the Boyle Building), the Blass Department Store, the Gazette Building, and the addition to the Pulaski County Courthouse (1912).

The 1908 renovation drastically altered the appearance of the Capital Hotel lobby. Before 1908, the building looked like a capital “U” with a small one-story section in the middle that served as a light well for the rooms on the inside of the “U.” The roof of this one-story section was made of glass, and would have been above the hotel offices and lobby. Mann’s redesign of the lobby included raising the height of the light well to two stories, creating an atrium with a stained glass skylight. The skylight features the Arkansas State Capitol dome. Although the Arkansas State Capitol was not completed by 1908, George Mann was the architect, so he knew what it would look like. By increasing the height of the light well, Mann also created a mezzanine with a colonnade and Ionic columns leading out to a larger, redesigned balcony on the front façade (current balcony configuration). The lobby’s interior finishes were upgraded, adding marble wainscoting, a patterned tile floor, round wood and plaster columns with faux marbling and decorative bronzed capitals, a marble staircase and counter, and new furniture.

Plate glass was installed across most of the first floor storefronts, reducing the number of doors on the front of the building. But the 1908 remodel included the installation of a chamfered corner entry at the hotel’s northwest corner (now in

the Capital Bar) in addition to the main entrances (there was a main entrance and a “ladies’ entrance” off Markham).

In addition to these changes, a second floor dining hall was converted into a ballroom and was located in the rear part of the east wing. [This ballroom was converted into hotel rooms during the 1983 renovation because the open span ballroom could not support the two floors above it, and because the hotel needed more guest rooms.]

After the 1908 remodel, the Bordeaux Drug Store occupied the western corner storefront (with the chamfered corner entry).

Henry Franklin Auten died in 1918, and the Capital Hotel was left to his heirs.

From the time the Capital Hotel opened in 1877 until the 1950s, it was a center of political and social activity. Many a politician announced their candidacy for public office from the “sweet spot” on the lobby stairs, and some of them used space in the hotel as their campaign headquarters. Formal dances were held in the ballroom during World War I. The Capital Hotel was the place to see and be seen.

### **The Cassinelli Sisters (1947-1977)**

Amelia and Elizabeth Cassinelli were part of a large Italian-American family who owned and operated various retail businesses in central Arkansas, including a vending machine business, restaurant, liquor stores, and bars. The Cassinelli sisters ran the Brass Rail Restaurant and a liquor store across Markham Street from the Capital Hotel. Pulaski County Circuit Judge Lawrence Auten, heir of H. F. Auten, ate at their restaurant quite a bit, and in 1947 he sold the hotel to Amelia Cassinelli (but the sisters ran it together). The Cassinellis relocated their liquor store (Brass Rail Liquor) to a first floor storefront in the Capital Hotel, rented space to a pool hall (Brunswick Billiard Hall), and operated the hotel. As downtown Little Rock declined in the 1960s and 70s, the **Capital Hotel lost business and began to go downhill**. The Continental Bus Station was located just

to the east of the hotel, and the combination of the bus station, pool hall, liquor store, and cheap hotel rooms created a problem. Transients frequently stayed in the hotel as paying customers...or not. And the building itself was suffering from a lack of maintenance and general upkeep. With that being said, by all accounts, Amelia and Elizabeth Cassinelli were hard-nosed businesswomen. They just couldn't afford to maintain the hotel the way they wanted to.

## **Cromwell**

Amelia Cassinelli died in 1976 from complications due to kidney failure, and soon after that, her sister, Elizabeth, was willing to sell the hotel. Elizabeth made a deal with Little Rock architect Ed Cromwell in 1977, but it was difficult to find investors and financing for such a massive undertaking. Plus, many business and civic leaders wanted to tear the building down. Nothing was going on in downtown Little Rock at that time, and it was hard for people to see any potential for revitalization. So the **Capital Hotel was boarded up** in an attempt to keep people out. The stained glass skylight, stained glass windows, and other hardware were removed for safe-keeping until the project could get off the ground. [The pool hall was still operating during this time, and people found their way into the hotel. It was common for someone from the Cromwell firm to stop by the hotel to show it to a potential investor and hear people inside the hotel scurrying away.] But everything **fell into place in 1980**. Ed Cromwell, Charles Bland, and Lawrence Walters joined to form the Capital Hotel Partnership, which received financing from the Metrocentre Improvement District Commission and the Federal Economic Development Administration, among other sources. And Lincoln Hotels of Dallas committed to manage the property once the renovation was complete.

### *1983 Renovation*

A massive rehabilitation effort began in 1982 and was completed in December 1983.

The building was reinforced with steel beams because it had never been properly reinforced for the addition of the fourth story (in 1890).



Building got new mechanical systems.

One extra-large elevator installed—in a large well where a freight elevator backed up to a passenger elevator. At the time of the elevator installation in 1983, the only other elevator that size was at the World Trade Center.

Fireproofed the building with the addition of a sprinkler system.

Remade and replaced rusted column capitals and other damaged pieces of the metal and iron façade.

Extensive plaster repair, historic paint analysis, tile floors in lobby repaired due to damage from water that had leaked in through the roof and repeatedly frozen and thawed on the floor.

Painstaking effort was made to faithfully restore the lobby as closely as possible to the 1908 Mann design, but other areas of the hotel interior were altered considerably. Ashley's and the Capital Bar & Grill were designed to complement the lobby, but are not reproductions of former establishments. [The revolving door in the bar was installed in 1983 and is English in origin. It was purchased at an architectural antiques store. The only original piece in the bar is the brass footrail.] Hotel rooms retained their original high ceilings and some original trim, but were otherwise updated.

A large 4-story addition was built to the south of the hotel building and featured an open first story for parking.

The 1980s rehab took about 18 months to complete, and the hotel reopened on December 19, 1983.

### **Stephens Steps In**

The Capital Hotel's management company, Lincoln Hotels of Dallas, was having financial trouble by 1986. Under the direction of Jack Stephens, Stephens Inc. bought interest in the hotel and helped keep it afloat. By the late 1980s, Lincoln Hotels went bankrupt, and Stephens Inc. owned 100% of the Capital Hotel. Between 1996 and 2001, Stephens made some changes to the hotel, including the replacement of the hotel's windows in 1997 and the construction of a wine cellar in 2001.

### *Latest Rehab (2005-2007)*

In 2005 Warren Stephens and his wife, Harriet, decided to temporarily close the hotel kitchen for plumbing upgrades, but once the project started, it was discovered that extensive repair work was necessary below the kitchen floor. So the timeline was set at about 6 months. But then they looked at the other major systems in the hotel and decided that mechanical, plumbing, and electrical upgrades were necessary throughout the building. This sort of snowballed into a major rehabilitation project, which included the replacement of windows (again—the 1997 wood replacements had rotted along the bottom of the sash because the window sills were slightly tilted allowing water to pool at the bottom of the window when it rained), HVAC, water heaters, installation of custom printed fabrics, curtains, and carpet, restoration of interior finishes like the faux marbling on the columns, installation of five kitchens with state-of-the-art technology, construction of three new event rooms—two off of the mezzanine (Brooks & Baxter rooms) and the ballroom on the first floor, enclosing the first floor parking area on the south addition and constructing a 1-story addition further to the south for offices, and they reduced the number of rooms from 123 to 94 in order to increase the square footage of rooms and make hotel suites.

The Capital Hotel reopened for business in November 2007.

\*\*This project was completed with the help of the 20% federal historic rehabilitation tax credit.

### **Details**

When you go up to the mezzanine, there will be a row of stained glass windows along each wall at the top of the staircase. When they created the 2-story atrium in 1908, they enclosed an area that had previously been outside in the light well.

Go to the first stained glass window on the west side and look up. You will see an exposed hinge, which was from an exterior window shutter.

The 4-story south addition from the 1980s created another light well behind the main staircase. They enclosed a 1-story area at the bottom of the light well for laundry, storage, employee areas, etc. In the Stephens remodel, they enclosed the 1-story parking area in the south addition and built out from that to create new service corridors and office space. This freed up the space behind the staircase, which is now the ballroom.

Brass rail in the mezzanine is from 1908, but more ironwork was added below it to raise the height of the railing.

The Capital Hotel currently employs 200 people.

Their most economical room is the Superior Queen at \$160 a night, and the most luxurious accommodations are available in the Grand Suite at \$730 a night.

And, as a special treat for tour participants, **Ashley's will offer a 10% discount** for lunch through February 8.

**Are there any questions before we split into groups?**

**Kitchen/wine cellar**

**Mezzanine—Brooks/Baxter and balcony (glass roof on balcony is from 05-07)**

**Mezzanine—Sample hotel room and window hinge**

**Lobby**

**Ballroom (keep some folks in here if necessary)**

Thank you! Next month's tour is March 1 at St. John's Seminary at 2500 N. Tyler in LR.

Brooks-Baxter War of April-May 1874—conflict between the supporters of two rivals for the Arkansas Governorship (Joseph Brooks and Elisha Baxter)—Baxter ended up as Governor, effectively ending Reconstruction in Arkansas.

Contested Senate race, President Ulysses S. Grant—visited LR in 1880 and stayed at the Capital Hotel, Sid McMath gubernatorial campaign run from hotel, and others?

Political significance...hob-nobbing of legislators and other elected officials. More laws made at the Capital Hotel than at the State House.

Gibson Discount Stores started here during Great Depression.