

**Sandwiching in History**  
**George W. Dickinson House**  
**515 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street, Little Rock**  
**July 11, 2014**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



### **Intro**

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Dickinson House! I’d like to thank Susan Maddox for allowing us to tour the house today.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

The George Ware Dickinson House was built in 1882 and is included in the Governor’s Mansion Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 (and has been amended several times since then).

### **Dickinson Family**

George Ware Dickinson and his wife, Cordelia Clementine Barker Dickinson, were both from prominent pioneer families. George Ware “G. W.” Dickinson was born

in Mississippi on December 26, 1843, to James and Nancy Ware Dickinson. In 1845 the Dickinson family moved to Holly Springs in southern Dallas County, Arkansas (Holly Springs is west of Fordyce) and farmed near the Ouachita River. In 1856 the Dickinsons moved to Jackson Township in Calhoun County. Their plantation in Calhoun County was called Oakland Farm and was located near the communities of Summerville and Harrell (between Hampton and Warren). G. W. Dickinson enlisted in the Confederate Army in 1861 and fought in the Trans-Mississippi Department under Brigadier General William Lewis Cabell until the Civil War ended in 1865. In 1869 Dickinson married Cordelia Barker, whose family owned the Barkada plantation in Drew County, Arkansas (Barkada was west of Monticello). After their marriage, G. W. and Cordelia Dickinson settled at Oakland Farm. Dickinson assumed control of the family plantation and became the most extensive farmer in Calhoun County, having 600 acres planted in cotton and operating his own steam-powered gin. The plantation's cotton was shipped by steamboat on the Ouachita River to New Orleans. Oakland Farm was a community in itself. According to the 1860 Census, the Dickinsons owned twenty slaves, and many of them remained on the farm as laborers after the Civil War.

G. W. and Cordelia Dickinson had six children: James Barker (1870-1947), Harvey Thompson (1871-1888), Thomas Tillar (1876-1963), Catherine Evelyn (1877-1893), Ruth Anne (1880-1973), and Georgia May (1882-1960). In 1882 the Dickinsons moved to Little Rock and built the house at 515 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street in order to give their older children educational advantages. However, for many years, the Dickinsons spent the summer months at the plantation home on Oakland Farm. Cordelia Dickinson was very independent and extremely capable of caring for herself and her family. She was often left with the children in Little Rock while her husband tended to business on the farm. And in the late 1890s, when her children, Thomas, Ruth, and Georgia, were enrolled at the Arkansas Industrial University (which in 1899 became the University of Arkansas), Cordelia temporarily moved to Fayetteville and operated a boarding house called the Dickinson Ranch. [According to the 1900 Census, Dickinson had 22 boarders, including her three children.]

G. W. Dickinson represented Calhoun County in the Arkansas Legislature for one term, his wife having announced his candidacy to keep him at the Capitol in Little Rock and away from the farm all winter, but he refused to repeat the experience. Dickinson sold Oakland Farm about 1910 and retired to his home in Little Rock. He died on February 12, 1912, at the age of 68. His obituary stated that he died suddenly after suffering a heart attack during his daily walk in Forest Park. You see, the streetcar line came right down 15<sup>th</sup> Street from Main, so it would have been fairly easy for Mr. Dickinson to hop on the streetcar and ride up to Forest Park, which was up in Pulaski Heights near the intersection of Kavanaugh and Taylor streets. It was about an hour-long ride one-way. G. W. Dickinson's funeral was held here at the house, and his body was later transported via the Rock Island Railroad to Harrell in Calhoun County for burial in the family cemetery.

After her husband's death, Cordelia Dickinson continued to live here until her own death in 1943, just one month shy of her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday. Cordelia Clementine Barker (Dickinson) was born on July 9, 1848, in Carroll County, Tennessee, to James and Mariah Simpson Barker. Cordelia's parents were from early Colonial families in North Carolina and Virginia, respectively; in fact, Cordelia was a cousin of Ulysses S. Grant, but, being an ardent Confederate, Mrs. Dickinson later said, "That branch of the family was not on the right side during the War Between the States." ["Glimpses of Yesterday," Arkansas Gazette, 1 March 1942]

The Barker family moved in 1855 from Tennessee to Drew County, Arkansas, where they established the Barkada plantation. Mrs. Dickinson later recalled the 3-week journey from their home in Tennessee to south Arkansas as being an important event in her childhood. About 115 people were in the group, including the family, governess, and slaves. The men added to the food supplies by hunting and fishing, and the Barker children had lessons from the governess along the way (Cordelia was one of 11 children). The convoy crossed the Arkansas River near Little Rock on rafts, and it took an entire day to get the whole group across, raft by raft. The group arrived in Drew County and spent the night in a vacant church building on Christmas Eve, 1855.

James Barker named his plantation “Barkada” after the family name, and a post office was established in the Barker home. The Barker family’s governess, Rebecca Kendrick, admitted children of neighboring families to the Barker family school. The Barkers also employed a physician on the plantation.

On April 12, 1869, Cordelia Barker married G. W. Dickinson in her father’s house at Barkada. Dickinson and his bride lived at his boyhood home at Oakland Farm. Years later, Mrs. Dickinson remembered the beauty of Oakland Farm, saying, “Wisteria climbed high in the trees there, and the wild honeysuckle, dogwood, goldenrod, and wild roses made the place a paradise.” [“Glimpses of Yesterday”] Mrs. Dickinson was an active promoter of Methodism and was known for her hospitality to pioneer ministers. Dr. Augustus R. Winfield, for whom Winfield Memorial Methodist Church in Little Rock is named, was among her guests at Oakland Farm. Even after the Dickinsons built their home in Little Rock (1882), Mrs. Dickinson spent many summers at Oakland Farm, where she organized a Sunday School and served as its superintendent. Before she died in 1943, Mrs. Dickinson was the oldest member of the congregation of First Methodist Church in Little Rock and attended Sunday School and the Sunday morning church service each week.

Cordelia Dickinson was also an expert at carding and spinning (cotton/wool), and her hand-woven materials were on display in the Arkansas Building at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933. She was an active member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Mrs. Dickinson loved to garden and transplanted many trees and flowers from Oakland Farm here at 515 W. 15<sup>th</sup>. The *Arkansas Gazette* ran a special interest piece on Mrs. Dickinson in 1942, when she was 93 years old. The following paragraph is from that article and gives you an idea of her personality.

“Though she speaks as calmly of dying as of taking any earthly journey and sometimes as though weary with the weight of so many years, Mrs. Dickinson plans constantly for the future and her philosophy does not permit her to give up to weariness or illness. Because she feared the next winter might be a severe one, she bought a new fur coat after she was 90

and went alone to have her ears treated because she did not think it necessary to be deaf nor necessary to bother anybody to accompany her. Falling one day in her driveway, she tied a scarf around her head, called a taxi to take her to her doctor to sew up the wound, and her sons did not learn of the accident until the next day. She still makes trips alone to see her daughters and occasionally spends a few days in Hot Springs. Even now she will not take her breakfast in bed and rarely lies down during the day for 'she does not want to get bedfast.'"

I mentioned earlier that G. W. and Cordelia Dickinson had 6 children. Two of their sons, James B. Dickinson and Thomas T. Dickinson, stayed really close to home. The house next door at 523 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street was built about 1890 by Dr. James R. Harvey and his wife, Ruth Ann Dickinson Harvey (sister of George W. Dickinson). Dr. Harvey was a Methodist minister and was superintendent at the Arkansas School for the Blind (when it was located at 1800 Center Street where the Governor's Mansion sits today; moved to Markham in 1939). About 1914, James B. Dickinson and his wife, Virginia Baker Dickinson, bought the house at 523 W. 15th. It is interesting to note that the house at 523 originally had a wood exterior and probably looked similar to this house, but after James B. Dickinson acquired it, the house was remodeled with a brick veneer and Craftsman-style details. James Dickinson was involved with the wholesale grocery business for years, working for Plunkett-Jarrell Grocery Company, Cooper-Dickinson Grocer Company, Western States Grocery Company, and Rand Wholesale Grocery Company, among others. His wife, Virginia Dickinson, who was affectionately called "Mama D" by family members, was a teacher (and she taught at several elementary schools in Little Rock, including Mitchell, Rose, Parham, and Rightsell).

Thomas T. Dickinson lived at 515 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street with his mother, Cordelia, and never left. Tom Dickinson ("Uncle Tom" to family members) was born in 1876. He graduated from the University of Arkansas in 1900 and earned a law degree in 1902. For three years after he graduated from law school, Tom worked as a library clerk for the Arkansas Supreme Court. His law office was later located in the Pyramid Building at 2<sup>nd</sup> & Center.

By 1920, Cordelia Dickinson rented rooms to boarders (remember, she had experience with the boarding house in Fayetteville). The 1920 Census shows Cordelia; her son, Thomas; five lodgers or boarders; and one servant in the house. The lodgers/boarders were all female and were employed as a reporter, cashier, bookkeeper, and teacher (one was unemployed). In 1930, Mrs. Dickinson still had 5 lodgers in the house (plus her son, Tom), but by 1940, only two teachers boarded at the home.

Cordelia Dickinson died on June 3, 1943, at the age of 94 and was buried in the Dickinson family cemetery at Harrell in Calhoun County.

After Cordelia died in 1943, her son, Tom, married for the first time (he was about 70 years old). Tom Dickinson and his wife, Martha George Dickinson, lived in the house together for about 20 years. Tom died on May 3, 1963, and was buried at Mount Holly Cemetery. [Tom Dickinson only had one arm. Lost the other one in some sort of accident. As he got older, Tom didn't work as much. He would open up his law office on January 1, do enough work to pay his bills for the rest of the year, and close up shop.]

Tom Dickinson's widow, Martha, was a registered nurse from Logan County, Arkansas, and lived in the family home until her death on August 17, 1979, at the age of 85. She was buried at Mount Holly.

### **Later Occupants**

About 1980, Martha Dickinson's heirs sold the house to Jerry and Carolyn Staley. In 1992 Susan Maddox signed a lease to purchase agreement with the Staleys, and they closed the following year. Susan had her advertising and marketing business in the house (Marketing Company of Little Rock). Although the house was not directly hit by the 1999 tornado that devastated the neighborhood, it suffered damage. The tornado slightly turned the house on its foundation, and as everything settled, the plaster cracked. Susan hired architect John Jarrard for the

home's rehabilitation and conversion to a bed and breakfast. They started work in September 1999, and Rosemont Bed & Breakfast opened in April 2000.

### **Interesting Facts**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when he was working for the Arkansas and United States Geological Surveys, a young Herbert Hoover stayed in one of the upstairs rooms at the Dickinson House.

Bill Clinton had breakfast with the Staleys in the Dickinson House the morning after he was elected president.

### **Architecture**

The Dickinson House is a good example of vernacular architecture, meaning it was not architect-designed and was built with local materials/using local methods. According to Susan, no two windows are exactly the same, the doors are handmade, and the ceiling heights vary from 12 to 14 inches. When completed in 1882, the house was an L-shaped cottage. According to Sanborn maps, sometime between 1897 and 1913, a 1-story addition was built in the back ell. The house features some Italianate-style details like the mansard-shaped pediments with decorative brackets below, tall narrow windows, and the bay window. However, the home's Colonial Revival-style front porch was probably a later addition (ca. 1910). The original porch might have featured beveled, square columns with Italianate-style brackets.

[The Italianate style started in England as part of the Picturesque movement, a reaction to Classical art and architecture. The movement emphasized rambling, informal Italian farmhouses. In the U.S., most examples were very informal rural models and were adapted to suit the individual owner, creating a truly indigenous style.]

The original house consisted of the family parlor (front guest room), formal parlor (living room), dining room, the front porch, and a little covered porch in the back ell of the house (now by the first floor bathroom). Upstairs, there were originally three bedrooms.

Sometime around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (appears on 1897 Sanborn map), the main house was connected to a 2-story ancillary building that housed the kitchen downstairs and servant's quarters upstairs. The portion that was built to connect the two structures now houses the kitchen.

Before 1913, a 1-story addition was built in the back ell of the house, and a small 2-story section was added onto the east side of the house, enlarging the size of the dining room and an upstairs bedroom.

In the 1930s, another small back porch was enclosed, and a sleeping porch was built onto a second floor bedroom. About 1940, the back living room was added.

The house still has its original stamped tin roof from 1882. Also, notice the walk-through window in the front guest room, which was originally the family parlor.

### **Interior Details**

Original curved staircase

Original mantles in downstairs parlors (front guest room and living room)

Gesso molding/picture rail in several rooms (Gesso is a plaster-based material put into molds to form decorative pieces and then attached to the plaster walls)

Most floors installed in 1915, the same year the house got electricity (and its electric fixtures)...except the front guest room/family parlor's floor is the original board floor from 1882. Had been covered with carpet.



**Susan's bedroom is off-limits during the tour!**

Next tour is August 1 at the Old North Little Rock Post Office (now the Argenta Branch of the Laman Library), 420 Main Street in North Little Rock.

Questions?