

Sandwiching in History
Farmer-Brooks House
623 Orange Street, North Little Rock
May 3, 2013
By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, 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 Farmer-Brooks House! I’d like to thank Charlie and Elizabeth Hart for allowing us to tour their beautiful home, and I’d like to thank them for providing refreshments. Finally, many thanks go to the staff of the North Little Rock History Commission.

The Farmer-Brooks House was built in 1913 (making it 100 years old this year!!) and is a contributing resource in the Argenta Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 (amended several times, with the latest boundary expansion done in 2007). The district is roughly bounded by Melrose Circle and 9th Street on the north, N. Broadway on the west, W. 4th Street and Broadway on the south, and Poplar Street on the east.

The house is named after its two long-term occupants, Benjamin Franklin Farmer and Norman Nelson Brooks (Farmer lived here from 1923 to 1961 = 38 years or so; Brooks lived here from 1981 to 2006 = 25 years or so).

Argenta History

The City of North Little Rock was called Argenta in its early days of settlement. Thomas Willoughby Newton, Sr., owned a large tract of farmland in this area and served as president of the Southwest & Arkansas Mining Company. Beginning in the late 1840s, Newton's mining company extracted silver and lead from the Kellogg Mine, which was located about 10 miles north of Argenta. In 1866 Thomas Newton's son, Colonel Robert C. Newton, named the newly platted town Argenta because of the silver his father had mined at "Kellogg diggins" (argentum is the Latin word for silver).

Argenta thrived because of the railroad industry. The Memphis & Little Rock Railway was the first operating railroad in Arkansas, and it ran east-west from Memphis to Argenta. The Memphis & Little Rock (which later became the Rock Island) crossed the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railway (later merged with Iron Mountain) at the M & LR Depot on 4th Street between Poplar and Magnolia, and the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad (became Missouri Pacific in 1917 and currently Union Pacific) came into Argenta along the path of what would be 11th Street and curved to the southwest, where it crossed the Arkansas River at the Baring Cross Bridge (completed 1873). The Iron Mountain railroad shops were west of Argenta in Baring Cross (current Union Pacific shops), and the M & LR shops were on the north side of 4th Street between Olive and Locust. Many residents of Argenta were employed by the railroad in some capacity.

Downtown buildings housed a variety of stores, restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, and saloons. Argenta was a rough town—it had no municipal government in the early days, so it was considered virtually lawless. In fact, the Arkansas Gazette often condemned Argenta, calling the town "a deserving candidate for a shower of brimstone." [AG 6/2/1877] Another Gazette article from November 25,

1880, insisted that Argenta “should be either incorporated or attached to Little Rock. Each train brings a number of tramps and disreputable characters to the place, who should not be tolerated in any community, but unless some means are taken to police the town they can carry things with a high head and go unpunished.” Gambling was also commonplace in Argenta, leading the Gazette to dub Argenta the “crap shooting center of Arkansas.” [AG 9/1/1889]

Argenta residents recognized these problems, and in 1890, the citizens of Argenta filed a petition to incorporate as a city of the first class. However, this attempt was quashed by Little Rock, when it claimed Argenta as its 8th Ward. Referencing a law that excluded voters in the targeted annexation area, the City of Little Rock laid a territorial claim on Argenta in order to increase its tax base. But Little Rock provided Argenta (8th Ward of LR) with very few city services in return for its taxes, so a plot was hatched to regain Argenta’s independence. William C. Faucette (prominent businessman, 8th Ward alderman, and 1st mayor of NLR) worked with three state legislators to get the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge Bill signed in 1903, allowing cities within a mile of one another to consolidate if the residents of both cities approved it at the polls. At a glance, the bill was written to allow the northeast Arkansas towns of Hoxie and Walnut Ridge to consolidate, which they later did. But the bill would also allow the new town of North Little Rock, which had been incorporated in 1901, to turn around and annex the 8th Ward in 1904, freeing Argenta from LR’s grasp.

In 1906, NLR changed its name back to Argenta. It remained so until 1917, when it was changed to NLR (at the urging of James P. Faucette, who thought it would make property values increase because of the city’s association with LR).

Farmer-Brooks House

The Farmer-Brooks House was completed in 1913 on lot 12, block 9 in Clendenin’s Addition. The Clendenin Addition was platted in 1872 by Judge John J. Clendenin and his wife, Mary, and included 12 blocks bounded by 4th, Main, 8th, and Willow.

[John J. Clendenin moved to Arkansas in 1836 and served as secretary to Governor James S. Conway and later became state attorney general and circuit judge before winning election to the Arkansas Supreme Court in 1866. He is believed to have built a log house on the hill at 13th and Main in NLR; therefore, the area immediately north of the Iron Mountain tracks was known as Clendenin Hill.]

Occupants

The first person to occupy 623 Orange Street was **John Thomas Webb**, a clerk for the St. Louis Southwestern Railway (or the Cotton Belt). [The Cotton Belt RR built passenger and freight depots about 1910 at the corner of Washington & Orange streets in NLR, so Mr. Webb was within walking distance to his job.] He lived here until about 1917. Then **John Blackwell**, who worked as a tinner, lived here for a couple years, followed by **Chester A. Richards**, a traffic manager.

In 1923 **Benjamin Franklin Farmer** and his wife, Ollie Riley Farmer, moved into the house. Ben Farmer was a conductor for the Missouri Pacific Railroad. In the 1920s, the Farmers also had a foster-child named Gladys living with them. She was 5 years old in the 1920 Census. By 1930, Ollie Farmer's son from a previous relationship, Joseph L. Wilson, lived with the couple at 623 Orange Street. At that time, Wilson was in his early 20s and worked as a druggist. In 1930 foster-child Gladys no longer lived with the couple. Ben Farmer worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad for 46 years and was a member of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, a railroad labor union. He lived here until his death in May 1961. He was 87 years old (and was buried at Edgewood Cemetery in Levy). Farmer's widow, Ollie, remained in the house until at least 1963, but I'm not sure what happened to her after that. She was not listed anywhere in the 1964 LR City Directory, so maybe she moved or died not long after her husband's death (she would have been about 80 years old in 1964).

The 1964 Directory lists **Raymond Plummer and Ms. Della Turner** at this address. Mr. Plummer worked at Adkins-Phelps Seed Company in North Little Rock. **Lee**

Trafton and his wife, May, lived here from 1966 until 1978. He was a painter. The house was vacant in 1979, and Charles W. and Nancy Brooks lived here in 1980 (I think they were related to Norman Brooks, but I'm not sure how—not the names of his siblings, but perhaps Charles was a nephew). At the time, Norman Brooks was living just down the block at 308 W. 7th (he owned this house as well as 306 and 308 W. 7th).

In 1981 Norman Nelson Brooks moved into the house. As a young man, Norman Brooks worked as a clerk for the Rock Island Railroad for 20 years, and he retired after 20 years of service as a Gunnery Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, having served in both the Korean and Vietnam wars. He was involved in the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks union and was the group's legislative chairman. He was also a member of the Sylvan Hills Masonic Lodge. Later in his life, he worked for the Arkansas Department of Labor.

Norman Brooks and Boosters for a Better Downtown NLR—

If you attended the Preservation Conference yesterday and saw Sandra Taylor Smith's presentation, you heard about the efforts to revitalize downtown NLR. Norman Brooks was one of 4 Argenta residents who, in the summer of 1991, organized the Boosters for a Better Downtown NLR in an attempt to take back their neighborhood.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the appearance of downtown North Little Rock changed dramatically. The construction of Interstate 30 in 1961 cut a swath through downtown. Urban Renewal projects of the 1960s and 1970s demolished entire blocks of historic buildings between Broadway and the Arkansas River, as well as significant structures along West 4th Street. People left the downtown area in favor of new residential areas in the northern part of the city or suburbs like Maumelle and Sherwood. In 1972 North Little Rock's Main Street was converted into a one-way street going north in order to alleviate traffic congestion, leading to the deterioration of the streetscape.

By the late 1980s, violent crime was a major problem in North Little Rock, with most incidents concentrated in the downtown area. As crime increased, property values declined, and many historic homes were divided into apartments and suffered from neglect. In 1990 North Little Rock set a record for the number of murders in the city's history—25 slayings in one year. Two downtown murders in the summer of 1991 motivated local residents to fight back and reclaim their neighborhood. Argenta residents Polly Wilks, Norman Brooks, Joe Simmons, and David Knowles organized the Boosters for a Better Downtown NLR in June 1991, and the group held regular community meetings with the goal of making the streets safe, preserving Argenta's unique historic resources, and revitalizing the downtown area. Now, fast forward about 20 years, and the efforts of several groups, including the Boosters, Argenta CDC, NLR History Commission and Historic District Commission, Main Street Argenta, the City of NLR, Argenta Downtown Council and Argenta Arts Foundation, and private investors, have resulted in an amazing success story. Argenta is a place where people love to live, work, and play.

Back to Norman Brooks....In May 2005 Mr. Brooks married Darla Jean Shepherd. He sold this house in 2006 and moved to Jacksonville. Norman Brooks died in April 2008 at the age of 78 (and was interred at the Arkansas State Veterans Cemetery in NLR).

When Mr. Brooks sold this house to **Robin Murphy** and his wife, Lynn, in 2006, he also sold them the houses at 306 and 308 W. 7th Street. Murphy rehabbed all three houses.

In 2007 Mr. Murphy sold this house to **Andrew Scott and Alicia Valliancourt**.

Charlie and Elizabeth Hart purchased the house in August 2011. They bought it the same day it was listed and paid the realtor to cancel the open house that had been scheduled. Charlie is retired from the Highway Department; he worked in bridge design and later with the bridge evaluation and inspection database. Elizabeth is currently employed by the Highway Department and works in the

planning division, where she deals with traffic flow patterns based on traffic volume.

Dutch Colonial Revival-style Architecture

This house is an excellent example of Dutch Colonial Revival-style architecture with its front-facing gambrel roof, slightly flared eaves, boxed cornice, central fanlight, shed-roof dormers, and mostly 9-over-1 windows (front window is 8-over-1). It is the only example of the style in the Argenta Historic District and is one of the few Dutch Colonial Revival-style houses in North Little Rock's downtown neighborhoods. The term "Colonial Revival" refers to a renewed interest in the early English and Dutch houses of the Atlantic seaboard. The style was most popular from about 1880 until 1950. However, the gambrel roof subtype of the style was far less common than the traditional side-gabled Colonial Revival-style house with a symmetrical façade and an accentuated front entrance.

This house has two shed-roof additions—one on the west and one on the south. What began as an open back porch on the west side of the house was enclosed in the 1930s and is now the kitchen. An addition was built on the south side of the house sometime after 1950. However, it is likely that the 3-over-1 windows used in that addition were salvaged from another property (because 3-over-1 wood windows were not popular in the 1950s). Pre-renovation photographs reveal that the south addition was originally smaller and had more windows. I believe that the whole addition was rebuilt and slightly enlarged in the 2006 rehab (and the number of windows was reduced so that it could be a bedroom). ****See photos from 1992 and 2005.**

Something else you will notice when looking at these pictures is the asbestos siding, which was probably installed in the 1950s. It was removed in 2006 to expose the original wood siding.

The detached garage was built in the 1930s. The 1939 Sanborn map labeled the garage as a separate dwelling at 623 ½ Orange Street, indicating that someone

lived there. And that was confirmed by the 1940 Census, which lists Clarence and Beuna Twidwell renting the garage for \$20 a month (the Twidwells were a young white couple; he worked as a filling station attendant, and she worked in a department store). The garage has a 220-v outlet, water hookup, and used to have a commode in it, so this is plausible.

The existing garage has bad termite damage, so Charlie plans to demolish it and build a new garage facing the alley—with permission from the NLR HDC, of course.

Interior Specs

- About 1,850 square feet
- Original windows
- Original pine floors
- French doors (missing a set that went between living and dining rooms)
- Transom windows
- Antique fixture in the entry way—came from a Hart relative's (Sarah Herman) 1914 home in Wynne, Arkansas.
- Closet at foot of stairs—installed so the master bedroom would have a closet

Next tour is June 7 at the LR YMCA. Thank you!!