

Sandwiching in History Tour

Gibb-Alzheimer House

December 3, 2021

By: Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Callie Williams, Britney Reding, and the Smith family



[ASHLEY SIDES, AHPP]

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a home that is over a century old? I'm Ashley Sides, Preservation Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, and today we are going to be discussing the history of the beautiful Gibb-Alzheimer House.

The architect of this house, Frank Gibb, was an extremely talented man. Born in 1861, he moved to Little Rock with his family in 1871 after his father's business burned down in the Chicago Fire. Gibb went to college at the Missouri College of Mines and graduated in 1881. He then moved back to Little Rock and opened his own engineering business. At the same time, he had begun designing residential buildings for his father's business.

Gibb's popularity as an architect grew and he designed more and more buildings. He is said to have designed more than 50 Little Rock residences and many commercial and industrial buildings including 20 courthouses around the state. The Arkansas Gazette said in 1889 that "many of the prettiest houses in the city have been built after Mr. Gibb's designs" and that his designs "show some of the most attractive features of modern architecture. He has built two Historic Landmarks, eight county courthouses, eight houses on the National Register of Historic Places, and at least eighteen more residential homes in the Governor's District.

Despite his great success, Frank Gibb is rarely mentioned in historical records. His wife, Mary Newton, the daughter of a prominent family and a well-known suffrage activist, is mentioned in newspapers from the early 20th century more than Frank is.

In 1904, Frank Gibb was chosen to design the building that would represent Arkansas at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. He built a beautiful Neoclassical Arkansas State Building, which featured massive columns and closely resembled a Greek temple. The building had great success at the fair and showed Arkansas in a better light to other states.

After the Fair, the Arkansas Building was purchased by a private owner, taken apart, and moved to Fayetteville, where it was reassembled and stood for many years.

Meanwhile, Gibb loved his State Building design so much that he decided to build this home for himself in Little Rock in a very similar, if somewhat more restrained, style. The house retains only one full-height portico, simplified with Tuscan columns instead of Corinthian, and lacks additional bays flanking the porch. This Neoclassical façade makes a bold statement on Arch Street.

Around the corner to the left, the house presents a Colonial Revival face to 18th Street, with a one-story entry porch and door surrounded by an elliptical fanlight with sidelights. The other first-floor windows of the house are topped with blind arches rather than fanlights or transom windows as the Arkansas Building had.

Gibb finished his house in 1906. It stands on Arch Street within what is today the Governor's Mansion Historic District. Arch Street used to be the main road running through this part of Little Rock before Broadway was built. Because of this, Mary decided she did not want guests to have to park on the extremely busy road, so although the house appears to front Arch Street, Mary requested the main entrance be located on the side of the building, off of 18th Street. Let's go inside and meet the current owners of this beautiful home.

[SCOTT SMITH, HOMEOWNER]

Hello! Welcome! Welcome to the Gibb house! We're so excited that you're here on this beautiful Arkansas fall afternoon. I'm Scott Smith and my wife Pam and I and our family have been in the home for about 11 years. We're really excited that you're featuring the historic nature of this great home. So come on inside! It's great to see you!

Welcome inside! As you said, Gibb patterned this house after the Arkansas building at the 1904 World's Fair in Saint Louis. Think about what that building was designed for—the crowds that would be coming to the World's Fair and being able to gather in different rooms or as a bigger group and to have really great time getting together at the fair—it was designed to be open so that many people could come through. And that's one of the things we've really enjoyed about this house. On this main entry level, it's so open: between the living room, foyer, and dining room is all kind of one big area. So that's allowed us to have some fun events here. We were privileged to have a wedding for some really good friends of ours. We've had a murder mystery dinner for about fifty people. We also had a book signing deal one time and had about a couple hundred people here. I know it was well over a hundred. The house's having been built for that kind of a flow, and to be able to have some different events, has really been fun.

One of the things that's I also think is interesting about this area is the double suspended stairwell. It's typical of what you might see in a courthouse, since Gibb designed so many of the courthouses around Arkansas. It has that look and feel to it. One of the things I discovered on a weekend—I'm an accountant by background—I think I was just automatically counting my steps as I was going up the stairs and I'm going, hmm, there's 18 steps from top to bottom. As the story goes, Gibb's daughter Cassie Bell was going to be turning 18 within a couple of years after they moved into this house, and they wanted to have a big party for her as kind of a coming out party. So the 18 steps on the stairwell were intended to be a place that she could walk down at the coming-out party. As the story goes, their niece turned 18 before she did, and so they had a party for her first. I believe it was written up in the papers. There was a couple hundred people. There was a midnight buffet, there was dancing and an orchestra and all that, so it was quite the affair. It was probably also quite a lot of work! I heard that when Cassie Bell actually turned 18, they decided to have that party at the Capital Hotel here downtown instead of at the home.

But it's just fun. We've always said this place is happiest when it's full of people and there's an event going on where people are just having fun together. So we love that feature of the house: the open nature of the main level. We can look around in some of the individual areas as well.

This is the living room. It's a place where we really enjoy spending time together as a family. We'll come back here in just a second, but I'll take you to one of my favorite places: the front porch—or what I call the front porch because it faces Arch Street, the main front of the house. Of course, we came in the family entrance off of 18th Street to come in the house. But this is the front porch that faces Arch Street.

Welcome to the front porch. This is one of our favorite places to hang out because it's just comfortable. I love the way that Gibb designed it with the covering over it. You can sit out here as long as it's not blowing rain, and it's just a comfortable place to be together as a family when the weather is nice. One of the architectural features you'll notice about the front windows: since an architect designed this house, everything's symmetrical, so the window was put in the middle for symmetry purposes, but it's not actually a full window. It's just a shutter from the outside with the opening in the brick. The master bedroom upstairs is behind that, and it's just wall behind it. Gibb went ahead and put it in the design of the house for symmetry purposes.

[SIDES]

One of the things that appeals to Smith about this house is the symmetry it has throughout, not just on the exterior, but carried over into the interior as well. Entering from the 18th Street door, as we did at the beginning, you find yourself in a central hall with the symmetrical double staircase straight ahead and rooms to either side. The dining room to the left and the parlor to right are separated from the central hall by four wood columns, two flanking each opening. Or, if you enter from the Arch Street portico, the paired columns line up and lead your gaze through the house from the parlor to the dining room, with its centered fireplace flanked by its own columns and the light fixture in the middle of the room, a counterpart to the one in the middle of the parlor.

[SMITH]

This is the dining room area. You know, in so many homes the dining room is a much smaller space. But that's one of the things that we've really enjoyed about this house: the fact that the dining room is a significant part of the whole downstairs main level. You can get a lot of people in here. We believe the 1904 World's Fair building was similar open design and was able to get larger groups in there as well.

One of the original features of the home is these light fixtures. Even having the color in these, as old as they are, is quite unusual. Originally this was a gas fixture. You can see the gas shutoffs. Then they converted it to electric later.

We really enjoy the nice big kitchen too. It feels kind of like your grandmother's kitchen in some ways. It's just old. It's got a lot of original features in it like the tin panels on the walls. As a matter of fact it gets pretty warm in the summer when we're cooking! It's got a ten-burner gas range stove. The kitchen has been used even throughout the years to cater weddings and events out of. Different families that have lived here have significantly contributed to the upgrade and preservation of the home, and certainly the kitchen is one of the areas that's happened in.

Also in the kitchen, the windows are large. There are large windows about seven feet tall throughout the home, even upstairs. And you can see the large windows here as well in the kitchen area.

One of the features of the home is that there is a buzzer in the living room that the family or guests could push, and it would ring back here in the kitchen. I suppose back in the day the folks that were back here in the kitchen serving the guests... It would ring back here when you punch that buzzer up there so they would know to have some service in that area.

[SIDES]

If the downstairs is made for entertaining, the upstairs is a private retreat. The stairway leads to the second-floor landing and a hallway, off of which are the family's bedrooms.

The Gibbs only lived in their majestic home until 1911. Why did they suddenly sell it? It's unclear, but it may have had something to do with a loan that Frank defaulted on that year. He had used his wife's jewelry as collateral on the loan. She brought a lawsuit to keep them, claiming that they were her personal property, and this was done without her knowledge. It was around this time that the Gibbs sold the home and move down the street to another home Frank had previously designed for his father's business. The house at 1801 Arch was then bought by Maurice Alzheimer. The Alheimers were one of the significant families of Little Rock at that time.

[SMITH]

There have been many great families that have lived here through the years, and many of which have made significant contributions to improvement and preservation of the historical nature of this home and this property. So we're grateful for that, and our family is committed to maintaining the historical nature of this property as well and continuing to improve it.

So I just want to say a hearty thanks for being here today and for featuring the Gibb–Alzheimer House. We've really enjoyed living here and being a part of the Governor's Mansion Historic District and meeting the neighbors. There are a lot of great people down here who've been in this neighborhood a long time and some who've been more recent, but they are all folks who are really active in this district. They get together and are very passionate about maintaining the historical integrity of the properties here. I think we all feel like custodians to some degree, of maintaining the great history that's a part of this neighborhood and these homes.

We're grateful for you being here! Thanks for featuring the home, and it's great to see you all today.

[SIDES]

In the new year we will kick off the 25th anniversary season of Sandwiching in History with a tour of the Saline County Courthouse in Benton. Built in 1902, it's one of the only Romanesque Revival style buildings in the entire state. Our 2022 tours will continue to be virtual, so please join us online for this program on January 7th.