



# Sandwiching in History Tour

## Engelberger House

2105 Maple Street, North Little Rock

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By: Ashley Sides

*Special thanks to: Ferrell Johnson,  
Sandra Taylor Smith, Cary Bradburn, and Charles Engelberger*



Hi! Welcome to Sandwiching in History! I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Behind me stands the Engelberger House, one of two Queen Anne-style houses in North Little Rock. The other one is the Baker House, which is a bed and breakfast. This one is a little older, and it's a private residence. The Engelberger family and their descendants have lived here since 1912. But its history started with a different owner in 1895, a teenager named Alonzo Clayton.

In the 1890s, young Lonnie Clayton was one of Little Rock's most famous residents, and surely one of the wealthiest too. But he didn't start that way. His family moved to Argenta—now North Little Rock—in the late 1880s when he was about ten. His parents had a lot of mouths to feed, so Lonnie helped earn a little money as a hotel errand boy and then as a shoe shiner. But his older brother Albertus was working as a jockey in Chicago, and Lonnie wanted to join him.

His parents disapproved, so he ran away from home to do it anyway. He started his professional career in 1888 as an exercise rider in Chicago at the age of twelve. The next year he moved to New Jersey for another employer and made his debut as a jockey in 1890. In no time the wins began piling up, and Clayton became a national sensation.

In 1892, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, Lonnie Clayton became the youngest person to win the Kentucky Derby. Throughout the 1890s he was one of the nation's premier jockeys. His racing career kept him traveling around the country most of the year. He would usually start the year in New Orleans, sometimes make a trip out west, then back to Little Rock, Memphis, Nashville, and Kentucky and on up to New York and New Jersey, then out to Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago on the way to California, and then back to the Northeast. He traveled first class with his hired team, which was very expensive, but he could afford it. Whenever he would return to North Little Rock, the local newspapers would report on it.

With earnings of \$65,000 by mid-decade—worth over \$2 million in today's money—Clayton was able to provide comfortably for his family. In 1894 the Arkansas Gazette reported on the eighteen-year-old's plans to build a \$3,000 home on the north side of the city. This Queen Anne house at 2105 Maple Street was completed in 1895 and called "the finest house on the North Side" and even "one of the most palatial residences in the State of Arkansas." Since Clayton was only able to occupy the house himself in the off-season when he wasn't traveling, he let members of his large family, including siblings, reside there. He also helped his parents to purchase farmland in what is now Sherwood. His father, Robert Clayton, was a carpenter and built his own farmhouse there in 1890; he also helped build Lonnie's Queen Anne house in town. Lonnie Clayton's real estate investments also included commercial property. In 1897 he built a two-story building in the 600 block of what is now Main Street, and it initially housed a grocery store downstairs and a hotel upstairs. That building was torn down in 1980.

The *Thoroughbred Record* described Clayton's home in 1896. This two-story brick veneer house "in the suburbs of North Little Rock" had "a fine brick barn and stable, where [was] kept a fine horse and carriage for the family's use." It had "a large and handsomely furnished double-parlor" and dining room downstairs, and on the second floor a "sporting room" with lounge chairs, photos, and Clayton's favorite books. Lonnie Clayton was described as quiet, humble, religious man who liked to read and hunt. Also upstairs was his own bedroom and a room for jockeys to stay in when they came to Little Rock to race. The attic was used as a billiard room and gymnasium.

Clayton and his family didn't enjoy this home for long, though. His racing fortunes were beginning to change by the end of the 1890s. As he matured it became harder to keep his weight down, which is crucial for a jockey. In addition, horse racing was becoming segregated, and opportunities for Black jockeys dwindled. Prior to this time, African Americans had been very prominent in the sport, but at the turn of the century they were pushed out due to racism. As Clayton faded from the spotlight, he began to struggle with finances. In 1900 he sold his splendid house for \$3000. His relatives eventually dispersed across the state and the country.

Efforts to revive his racing success over the next few years were largely unsuccessful. There are hints that Clayton may have gone to England to race, but this is unproven. He moved to California at some point and worked as a bell man for the Union League. He died in Los Angeles in 1917 at the age of forty-one. A Chicago newspaper remembered him, saying, "Several years ago Lonnie Clayton was a famous jockey, and one of the highest salaried jockeys on the turf. His admirers were by the thousands, and he was dear in the hearts of the sporting fraternity."

Lonnie Clayton was largely forgotten over time, and if this historic house hadn't been so carefully preserved, North Little Rock's link with this great nineteenth-century jockey might not have been fully recovered. For much of the twentieth century, a fuzzy legend was told in North Little Rock of a Black jockey from England named *Colburn* or *Coleman* who built the *Baker* House but was forced to sell it before moving in due to racial prejudice. You can see how there's a kernel of truth there, but the details are confused. For one, the legend was attached to the wrong Queen Anne house. But a historic inscription preserved in the attic of the Engelberger House proved conclusively that the jockey of North Little Rock was Alonzo Clayton and that this was his home.

Written in graphite in the attic is a list of names of Clayton family members in age order: Charley, Vassilonia, Albertus, Medora, Alonzo, Leller, Lorinza, Robert, and Betty, along with Mama and Papa Clayton, and dated 1899 with the word "goodbye." It was probably written by Lonnie's sister Bessie (or Betty) when they moved out. The writing matches that on Bessie's family photo album, which came to light in 2007 when the North Little Rock History Commission located her son in Los Angeles. The album includes a picture of *this* house and the captions, "'Happy childhood memories,' 'My Home,' Little Rock Arkansas." The confusion with the Baker House was definitively laid to rest. With the North Little Rock residence of this once-famous jockey firmly established, Alonzo Clayton was posthumously inducted into the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame in 2012.

After Lonnie Clayton sold his home in 1900, it went through several different owners until Joseph Engelberger bought it in 1912. His father, Melchior Engelberger, had immigrated from Switzerland in 1880 with his wife, daughter Sophia, and sons Joseph and John to settle in the Little Rock area. The Engelberger family quickly established themselves in the community and became prominent citizens in North Little Rock.

Joseph Engelberger married Anna Korte, a German immigrant, in 1890 and they had several children. A wealthy family, they owned various properties in the Little Rock area, including a succession of three different saloons in North Little Rock. One of these saloons was located in the Faucette Building on what is now Main Street. When prohibition banned alcohol in the 1910s, Joseph Engelberger converted his saloon into a restaurant. He was also a bank director for a couple of local banks. The family lived in Argenta but also owned a farm in Levy. This was later sold to a developer and became the Engelberger Subdivision.

In 1912, Engelberger and his family bought the Queen Anne house on Maple Street that had been built by Lonnie Clayton seventeen years earlier. Joseph and Anna raised up four of their

eight children in the house, and it has stayed in the family line since then. Now, 110 years later, five generations of Engelbergers and their descendants—from various branches—have called this special place home. The current owners are Ferrell and Linda Johnson, and Linda is Joseph's great-granddaughter.

The house has undergone relatively few changes over its lifetime, and due to restoration work the Johnsons have done, even most of those changes have been rewound so that the house today looks pretty much as it originally did in 1895.

The Queen Anne style was popular between 1880 and 1910, and this house features typical elements. It has a steeply pitched hipped roof with irregular projecting bays, many of them gabled, and an octagonal corner tower that still has its original slate shingles and decorative metal finial. The corbelled brick chimneys correspond to the three original fireplaces in the interior, but of course the house now has central heating and air. Exterior wall surfaces are textured with fish-scale siding on the octagonal drum of the tower and the second story surfaces of the western portion of the house, as well as with weatherboarding in the gable ends to the north, east, and south. The roof gables on the south overhang cutaway bay windows with corner-bracket detailing. Windows throughout the house sit on hewn-stone sills and belt courses and are topped with hewn-stone lintels. The varied features of Queen Anne houses were expensive and were meant to show off the owner's means. In other words, Lonnie Clayton was making a statement with this house.

The porch has probably undergone the most change. At some point before midcentury the original delicate turned porch supports and spindle-work were removed, and heavy, Craftsman-style brick columns and a brick balustrade were added. Johnson restored the spindle-work to the porch and balcony in the 1990s. Someday he also hopes to enclose the back porch in latticework again as it was in historical photographs.

The interior of the house has also seen very few changes. Due to COVID precautions, we did not go inside, but we can peek at some photos. The house has three bedrooms, a full attic, and a basement. There was probably no plumbing originally, and the bathroom still has the old clawfoot tub probably from the 1910s. Some floors have been redone and the kitchens have been updated.

The Engelberger House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. It's a private residence and not available for tours. But it's an outstanding historic property that preserves significant pieces of North Little Rock's history.

We'll have to leave it there, but if you're curious about Alonzo Clayton or the Engelberger family, the North Little Rock History Commission will be glad to tell you more.

Next month we have a unique Sandwiching in History topic. "La Petite Roche" is THE geological "little rock" on the banks of the Arkansas River, which gives our capital city its name, and it's celebrating a tricentennial of sorts! But what's three hundred years to a rock that's eons old?

And why does it have a French name? What's its link to the origins of our capital city? That's what you'll find out right here in our April virtual tour.

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