



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Sandwiching in History Tour

First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock

201 W. 4th St., North Little Rock

December 5, 2025

By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Hayden Finley and Allen Engstrom



*Sanctuary of the former First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock, now the Sanctuary at Argenta
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2025*

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to the Sanctuary at Argenta, historically known as the First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock. I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming to our Sandwiching in History tour today!

Historic properties go through different eras, different owners, and different uses over time. And this one is no longer owned or used by the Presbyterian Church. I want to express

gratitude to the current owner, Allen Engstrom, and his associate, Hayden Finley, of the Sanctuary at Argenta, for letting us tour this beautiful space and learn about its history up close. Thank you, Hayden and Allen! They are available for questions after the presentation.

Another person I am indebted to for this tour is Rachel Patton. Many of you know Rachel. Formerly known as Rachel Silva, she was the preservation outreach coordinator at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program for many years. Between 2008 and 2016 she led 185 tours, including one of this church in 2010. Argenta is her home, and as Executive Director of Preserve Arkansas, her office has been in this building for 9 ½ years. So I invited her to be part of today's presentation, because I can't think of a better person to do it. Unfortunately, she had a conflict and wasn't able to. But I've had access to her well-researched tour script from 2010, as well as historic photographs of this building that she came up with, and these resources have been indispensable to me in preparing today's tour.

Argenta

So, in a respectful nod to Rachel, I'm going to borrow from her script to set the historical background in which this church developed. Since the church building is a contributing resource in the Argenta Historic District, I'll tell you a little bit about Argenta, using Rachel's presentation from 2010.

The City of North Little Rock was called Argenta in its early days of settlement (the town of Argenta was surveyed & platted in 1866). The area was called Argenta because of the silver that was found at the nearby Kellogg mine (*argentum* is the Latin word for silver).

Argenta developed around the railroad. The Memphis and Little Rock Railway was the first operating railroad in Arkansas, and it ran east–west from Memphis to Argenta—in fact, it crossed right through this block. The Memphis and Little Rock Railway crossed the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railway in the middle of Argenta, and the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad ran along the edge of town. Because the railroads brought travelers to Argenta, the most common businesses catered to people from out of town. There were hotels, boarding houses, saloons, gambling houses, brothels, and restaurants downtown.

Argenta was a rough town—it had no government in the early days, so it was virtually lawless. There were no paved streets, and the sidewalks were made out of wooden planks. This side of the Arkansas River flooded often, and some of the streets stayed under water for weeks, because there was no city-wide drainage system.

In 1890, the citizens of Argenta filed a petition to incorporate as a city of the first class. However, seeing this, the City of Little Rock annexed the town of Argenta despite the protests of Argenta residents. 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.

However, Little Rock did not provide Argenta (now its 8th Ward) with many city services in return for their taxes, so a plot was hatched to regain Argenta's independence. William Faucette (a prominent businessman and later the first mayor of North Little Rock) worked with three state legislators to get a bill signed in 1903 called the Hoxie–Walnut Ridge bill. It allowed cities within a mile of one another to consolidate if the residents of both cities approved it at the polls. The bill was ostensibly written to allow the Northeast Arkansas towns of Hoxie and Walnut Ridge to consolidate, which they never actually did. But the stealthy bill would also allow the town of North Little Rock (a community that had been incorporated in 1901 just to the north of Argenta, the 8th Ward of Little Rock) to annex Little Rock's 8th Ward in 1904. This is how Argenta regained her independence from Little Rock, by marrying up with North Little Rock.

In 1906, this new North Little Rock changed its name back to Argenta. It remained so until 1917, when it reverted to North Little Rock. That's been the official name of the city since then, so when we refer to Argenta now, we're talking about the historic downtown core that traces its origins to the mid-1800s and the railroad.

The Argenta Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 and has been amended several times since then. A final boundary expansion was done in 2007, which brought the First Presbyterian Church into the district as a contributing property.

The Argenta Historic District now encompasses the area that represents the city's early residential and commercial development between 1890 and 1955. It 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 the railroad tracks on the east side of Main Street form the eastern boundary.¹

¹ Rachel Silva, "Sandwiching in History: 1st Presbyterian Church, North Little Rock" (Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, April 9, 2010), 1-2. In addition to this section borrowed directly from Silva's 2010 tour script (with minor modifications), other parts of this presentation also rely on that script as the primary source of information, unless otherwise noted.

Argenta Presbyterian Church

Let's go back to 1895. Argenta is the 8th Ward of Little Rock. Local citizens are feeling neglected by the city administration. But the First Presbyterian Church of Little Rock wants to serve the people living on this side of the river. It was 130 years ago this month that the Little Rock church's pastor, Rev. S. G. Miller, started a mission congregation here in Argenta with 13 other members. At the beginning they were meeting in a Methodist church building. In the early days, they owed a lot to the help they got from Little Rock Christians. According to the *Arkansas Democrat*, "The first Sunday school superintendent, C. E. Bossinger, crossed the river in a skiff or walked across the railroad bridge to conduct Sunday sessions."²

On March 5, 1899, the newly planted church was formally organized as the Argenta Presbyterian Church, though they were also commonly called the North Side Church. The trustees soon acquired a site for their own church building here at 4th and Maple, and on November 2, 1902, the first service was conducted in the new building.³

That 1902 building is still here, as one wing of the overall church complex, but it looks very different than it did back then. Booklets of photos are being passed around that will allow you to see the church at different stages of its history. It's been through many phases of development, with four or five additions over time, along with a few subtractions.

Life, Change, and Historic Preservation

And before I start describing these architectural transformations over time, I want to take a moment and acknowledge what's about to be an elephant in the room. I've told you that this building is National Register listed. And I'm also telling you that it's been drastically altered from its original appearance. You might be thinking that sounds paradoxical. I'm not going to lie, significant alterations and massive additions will frequently disqualify a property from National Register eligibility.

So what's the story here? The short answer is that this church has a couple of things going for it. First, it's not individually listed; it's a *contributing* property in a historic district. So, even with all the alterations, it still retains enough historic integrity to relate to the period of significance of the district and contribute to its overall historic associations. Sometimes it's

² "1st Presbyterian, NLR, Has its 90th Anniversary," *Arkansas Democrat*, March 4, 1989, 14A.

³ "First Presbyterian to Celebrate 80th Anniversary," *Arkansas Democrat*, February 28, 1979, 4E; "1st Presbyterian, NLR, Has its 90th Anniversary"; Silva, "Sandwiching in History: 1st Presbyterian Church, North Little Rock," 3.

easier to get a property listed as contributing in a district than it is to getting it individually listed. It would face more scrutiny by itself.

But second—and much more importantly—the period of historic significance is really long for the Argenta Historic District. It encompasses properties dating between 1890 and 1955—so all of the major reconfigurations and additions of this building are safely within the period of significance. The 1954 sanctuary contributes as much to the history of how Argenta developed as the original 1902 edifice.

Also, the Argenta Historic District incorporates a wide range of property types, from residential to commercial to social to religious, and a variety of architectural styles, like Victorian, Craftsman, Modern, and various Revivals: Colonial, Classical, Spanish, Tudor. So in this case, the type of construction doesn't matter much for whether it can contribute or not.

Crucially, that provided the latitude to register this drastically altered property as a contributing resource in the historic district, making it eligible for financial incentives for its ongoing preservation. Historic preservation sometimes gets stereotyped as trying to mothball properties in bygone eras and stifle healthy future development. But I think that this old church building is a good example of the flexibility of preservation standards to recognize that even alterations can be part of a property's historic significance and ongoing use—they're all chapters in a story.

You might have heard the saying, “Living things grow, and growing things change.” This property is a good example of that. It’s kind of like how a tree gets bigger as it adds growth rings each season. Each addition and alteration to this building tells the story of what was happening in that season of its history. So now let’s jump back into the timeline and pick up the history where we left off—1902.

A Growing Church

The first photo in the packet that’s being passed around shows a man in a frock coat standing in front of a little brick church with a prominent tower. That’s how the Argenta Presbyterian Church looked after it was constructed in 1902. You’d hardly recognize it now, but it’s still there. That’s the wing of the building adjacent to Maple Street, on the other side of the courtyard from the sanctuary that we’re in. It was built in a simple Gothic Revival style, with arched windows and a tower on the southeast corner. It measured 40 by 50 feet and had a slate roof.⁴

⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, July 17, 1902, 5.

The man at the top of the church steps in that photo is Rev. T. C. Johnston (or Johnson; the records support both),⁵ the minister between 1900 and 1904. Under Johnston, the congregation established as a mission with 13 members just a few years prior had added over 100 members to its roll by the time this church building was dedicated on December 21, 1902. It was built for around \$4,000, some \$3,000 of which was reported to have been contributed by the South Side churches.⁶

The North Side Church had a good relationship with its fellow Little Rock congregations, but Rev. Johnston was active in the campaign for Argenta independence. He presided over several meetings at various venues around town during 1903 to rally support for breaking away from Little Rock. He told one crowd, "We all love Little Rock, but we want to tell our friends on the other side of the river that we have a Big Rock here which we love better."⁷

Argenta did gain its independence later that year. Later, when Argenta changed its name back to North Little Rock in 1917, the Argenta Presbyterian Church followed suit in 1920 and became known as the North Little Rock Presbyterian Church.

I'm not sure it's visible in the photo, but the Rock Island Railroad tracks cut right through the block not far behind the church building, probably about where the former manse is now. You can see the railroad route on the map in the picture packets. The star shows where the church is located, and you can see the tracks right to the north. When the local rail yard was closed in 1910, these tracks were torn up sometime within the following four years.⁸

This was an era of great growth in the city as well as in the church. The congregation needed more space. Perhaps the removal of the tracks opened up the opportunity to expand to the north. In 1921, they extended the sanctuary, adding another set of four windows. You can see the addition in the next photo of the church, marked with a small red box. The bricks are slightly different.

⁵ His name appears dozens—perhaps hundreds—of times in local newspapers from the period, and his name is spelled both ways, without either one being evidently predominant. It even appears at least once as "Johnstone."

⁶ *Newport Daily Independent*, December 19, 1902, 3; *Arkansas Gazette*, July 17, 1902, 5.

⁷ "Argenta Ladies Take up the Fight," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 8, 1903, 1.

⁸ Rachel Silva, "Sandwiching in History: Faucette Bros. Bank Building" (Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, November 2, 2012), 4.

The larger red box in that photo marks the next addition. Shortly after the sanctuary was expanded, the Sunday School paid for a classroom addition, perhaps around 1924. It had half-timbering and knee braces in the gable end.

Within a couple of years, the Sunday School had already run out of space again; the Men's Bible Class was meeting in a World War I building behind the church, probably a surplus structure brought in from Camp Pike. So, sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, they expanded the main building yet again—the top portion of the Sunday School addition with the half-timbered gable was converted into a full second story. The change is evident in the next photo of the church, outlined in a red box.

In 1927, the church constructed a Craftsman-style manse north of the building as a pastor's residence. It housed the pastors until the 1960s, when the Presbytery of Arkansas started giving its ministers housing allowances. It then served as a church youth building, and later it housed various businesses and nonprofit organizations. The church sold it in the 1990s, and it was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.

The building spree abated for a couple of decades after the 1920s. But in the 1940s, the growing church began expanding again. There were five houses along 4th Street between the church and Orange Street. You can see them on the 1939 Sanborn map in the packet. None of them are left now. In 1942, the church bought the adjacent house to the west and began using it as an additional Sunday school building and a pastor's study. In 1948, they bought the next house to the west, but they had very different plans for it. It was going to be torn down to make way for a bigger, better sanctuary—the one we are in now.

John Parks Almand and the 1954 Sanctuary

They hired architect John Parks Almand to design the new sanctuary. Almand was from Georgia but came to Little Rock in 1912 to work under the influential architect Charles Thompson. In 1916 he opened his own office, and in the 1920s he started getting some really significant commissions, such as the First Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, the Medical Arts Building in Hot Springs, and, notably, the Little Rock Central High School. In the 1930s he worked in Washington, D.C., designing federal buildings for the Treasury Department, and during World War II he was a construction engineer for Naval stations in Michigan and Texas, after which he returned to Little Rock. Over his career he designed more than fifty churches around the state.⁹

⁹ W. Russ Aikman, "John Parks Almand (1885-1969)," CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas, September 4, 2025, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/john-parks-almand-501/>.

Almand designed this sanctuary in a simple, Modern interpretation of the Gothic Revival style, updated for 1954. It has a steeply pitched roof and pointed-arch stained-glass windows that evoke the lofty, reverent Gothic style, in a spare, minimally ornamented setting. He tied the new sanctuary to the old with an arcade of plain Gothic archways. In the course of installing the arcade, which runs across the front of the 1902 sanctuary, that building's original tower was shorn off at roof level, and the gable end facing 4th Street was boarded over, obscuring its Gothic arch stained-glass windows. This removed the most visible churchy elements of the old traditional building. He replaced it with a simple, low-profile bell tower between the arcade and the new sanctuary to serve as the main front entrance and update the complex with a Modern aesthetic.¹⁰ The photos of the construction do a good job chronicling the transformation. They also show that the frame and exposed trusses of this sanctuary are steel, but sheathed in wood.

The first worship service was held in the new sanctuary on August 22, 1954, and it was officially dedicated on October 10 of that year.

Interestingly, the house in between the old and new sanctuaries was still standing, semi-enclosed in the courtyard behind the arcade. Sunday School classes continued there until the 1902 sanctuary could be remodeled to hold a pastor's study, church office, and fellowship hall, and then the house was demolished as well.

In 1957 the church hired John Parks Almand again to design an educational annex spanning the north side of the courtyard and connecting the two main buildings.¹¹ It is of a very utilitarian design, with classrooms and restrooms along a main hallway. Now the courtyard was fully enclosed. In 1962-1963, a kitchen was added off fellowship hall (the old sanctuary), jutting into the courtyard. And the complex was complete.

¹⁰ In the 1954 bell tower, you can see the old railroad bell that was donated to the church around the turn of the 20th century by the Union Pacific RR (at that time the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern RR). See Silva, "Sandwiching in History: 1st Presbyterian Church, North Little Rock," 6.

¹¹ This connector area was used as the kindergarten and nursery. Down the hallway from west to east was the choir room and then all the rest were classrooms. See Silva, "Sandwiching in History: 1st Presbyterian Church, North Little Rock," 6.



The south elevation, or front side, of the former church building. The white gable at the right belongs to the 1902 sanctuary. The arcade, low bell tower, and other sanctuary to the left were added in 1954. (Photo by Ashley Sides, 2024)

Transitions

The many additions tell a long story of growth. The First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock was a very active church with a large membership for many decades. However, as the neighborhood began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s and the crime rate was high downtown, people moved out to Park Hill, Lakewood, Sylvan Hills, Sherwood, etc., and the church suffered greatly. (This was before the renaissance of downtown Argenta.) By the early 2000s, attendance averaged less than 50 each week, largely elderly members. They no longer had a Sunday School, so the education wing sat unused. In 2006 and 2007, the church started renting studio space to artists and hosting art events, which provided a source of income and another way for the church to be involved in serving the community. Other groups have rented office space in the building as well, including Preserve Arkansas, the statewide historic preservation nonprofit.

But the church eventually faded. In December 2019, Pastor Ann Russ moved on, and the Session of the church turned the local administration over to the denominational leadership, the Presbytery of Arkansas. The congregation would meet for worship on the Second Sunday of each month at 4 p.m. Of course, that was right before the covid-19 pandemic, and by the



time it was over, I'm not sure the church was even still meeting.¹² So with the space being available, Refuge Church has been worshiping here since 2021.¹³

In January 2024, the Presbytery sold the property for \$1,000,000 to Regal Beagle Holdings, LLC, led by Allen Engstrom, managing director at CFO Network.¹⁴ That brings us to the latest chapter of this property's story. Engstrom and his associate Hayden Finley have spent the last year transforming the former First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock into the Sanctuary at Argenta, a wedding and event venue that expands upon the services offered at their property across the street, the historic E. O. Manees House.

They've spruced up the interior of this sanctuary by covering the brown wood ceiling with white panels, hanging new chandeliers, replacing the pews with chairs, and installing new flooring. They've paved the courtyard and added a fountain. All this has been done with sensitivity to the historic characteristics of the property.

Because it's listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing resource in a historic district, and because it is a privately owned income-producing property, it is eligible for historic preservation tax credits. This financial assistance has made this renovation project possible. As you explore the property, you'll see many ways they've incorporated the history of the church into the decoration of the building. In the entryway and foyer there are historic plans and pictures of the building. They reused old pointed-arch windows from the 1902 sanctuary as mirrors to brighten up that little room. Lining the halls are original pews from the 1902 sanctuary, which had been in storage in the attic. You'll also see a wall display of old church hymnals, as well as framed programs from the 1954 sanctuary dedication and an 80th anniversary celebration service in 1979.

Development is ongoing. You can look around the building, but there's one hallway that's off-limits, because it is being renovated into bridal and groom suites. And in the future, they are hoping to transform the 1902 sanctuary into a restaurant.

Conclusion

This is a great example of adaptive reuse. When a historic property's original use is no longer viable, it can be converted to serve a different but compatible purpose. The story of First Presbyterian Church of North Little Rock is tied up with the story of the rise and fall of

¹² "First Presbyterian in 2020," First Presbyterian in Argenta, archived September 23, 2020, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20200923170834/https://argentapres.org/newtoyou/about-our-pastor/>.

¹³ "Our Story," Refuge, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://www.refugenlr.org/our-story>.

¹⁴ "Real Estate Transactions," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, January 28, 2024, 75.

the Argenta downtown from the 1890s to the 1990s. The late 20th century was not a good time for downtown city centers, especially in the wake of urban renewal programs that stripped the historic fabric and character while the flight to the suburbs was draining them of vitality. Argenta was reborn by creating a historic district and leveraging historic preservation investments to draw businesses and residents back in. The Sanctuary at Argenta is part of this movement of using existing historic assets to enhance modern quality of life and contribute to a vibrant city culture. It's a win-win for the property owners and for the public.

I want to give Allen Engstrom and Hayden Finley a chance to speak from their perspective about their vision and this journey that they've embarked on. Feel free to ask them questions. And then you're welcome to walk around the halls and other wings of the building before you leave.

But before I turn it over, I do have one more thing I want to announce. We have our new 2026 Sandwiching in History schedule ready for you, so be sure to pick up a brochure and make plans to visit some of our tours next year. The next tour will be on February 6 at the Old VA Hospital on Roosevelt Road in Little Rock. That's another property that has recently been redeveloped using historic preservation tax credits as an adaptive reuse project, turning it into residential apartments and office space. And here's a strange coincidence: Our friends at Preserve Arkansas, who have had their office in this First Presbyterian building for the last many years, are in the process of moving to a new office at the Old VA Hospital. Maybe we'll see Rachel Patton at our next tour.

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