ARKANSAS HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Sandwiching in History Tour
Gibson & Company's Blue Star / Horizon Home
Little Rock

November 6, 2026

By Ashley Sides
Special thanks to: Nathan Smith



Gibson & Company's Blue Star / Horizon Home
Photo by Ralph Wilcox, 2024

Welcome and Introduction

Hi! I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. I'm so glad you've joined us for this tour of the Gibson & Company Blue Star / Horizon Home. We're going to stand here for a few minutes while I share the history of this house with you, and after that you will be able to look around inside the home at your leisure.

I want to thank Nathan Smith, the owner, for opening up his home to us today. He's a super generous guy, and I'm so excited that he's willing to share this special historic treasure with the community like this.

By gathering here to tour this home today, we're following in the footsteps of a well-established precedent. This house was made to be shown! Preserve Arkansas led a tour of the home this summer. The Quapaw Quarter Association led a tour just earlier this week. And when the home was built in 1964, it opened to a 10-day showing, with invited tour groups and public open house hours, and heavy coverage in the local newspapers. It was designed intentionally as a showpiece.

This house was meant to be seen, to impress, to stand out. But not as something exclusive. Instead, it was presented as a vision of what modern American homebuilding could look like. Visitors were supposed to walk through, admire what they saw, and then leave wanting some of the same features for their own homes.

When we look at the house today, we naturally think of it as an architectural landmark. And it is. But in 1964, it was also a marketing tool.

A Symbiotic Relationship

It originated as a symbiotic relationship between several companies to showcase the benefits of their respective services, amenities, and building materials. This project brought together the utility company Arkansas Louisiana Gas, the construction and realty firm Gibson & Company, the architect Frank Eugene Withrow, and a concrete industry consortium.

The Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company

For the Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company, or Arkla, the challenge was encouraging people to use more natural gas appliances in their homes. Utility companies across the country had long sponsored model homes that showcased the latest gas ranges, ovens, water heaters, heating systems, and other conveniences. By building and promoting homes equipped with modern gas technology, they hoped homeowners would associate gas service with comfort, convenience, and modern living.

Arkla sponsored the construction of this house to serve as a model Blue Star home. The Blue Star program identified houses equipped with a range of modern gas appliances and systems. The American Gas Association had created the Blue Star program in 1959 as a promotional counterinitiative to the "Live Better Electrically" campaign in order to entice customers to purchase homes equipped with gas amenities. Kind of like energy-efficiency labels today, the Blue Star designation signaled that a home incorporated the latest technology and conveniences available to consumers. In 1964, that carried considerable appeal. Americans were increasingly embracing new household technologies, and builders eagerly marketed homes as symbols of modern life. To qualify as a Blue Star Home, a house had to meet three criteria: (1) contain at least three American Gas Association-approved gas appliances, such as a gas range, water heater, and furnace that met minimum performance standards; (2) have at least one optional outlet for either a gas refrigerator, dryer, smokeless-odorless disposer, or air conditioning; and (3) meet approval of the local utility for certain functional design requirements. Blue Star Homes were highlighted in newspaper ads, but besides the designation, they were ordinary homes for sale. In contrast, the Arkla House was intentionally a model home where visitors could be introduced to the wonders of modern gas appliances and systems directly. It was equipped with gas all-year air conditioning (that is, heating *and* cooling), a gas range/oven, gas dryer, gas water heater, an outdoor gas grill, and exterior gas lights.

Gibson & Company

John L. Gibson's construction and real estate firm, Gibson & Company, was given the building contract. Gibson & Company was an active builder and realtor in Little Rock, including in the Shannon Hills East Subdivision in the 1960s. Some of their other builds had also been Blue Star homes, but they also had experience building Gold Medallion all-electric homes under the "Live Better Electrically" program. The building permit for 7012 Shamrock Drive was issued in June 1963, and Gibson's company got to work. I wish I could tell you more about John L. Gibson and Gibson & Company, but I couldn't find much background on them.

The Concrete Industries Horizon Homes Program

Gibson made a key decision early on that made this house extra special and garnered it a lot of attention once it was built. He decided to construct it within the framework of the Concrete Industries Horizon Homes Program. Similarly to the Blue Star or Medallion Homes programs, the Horizon Homes Program was a promotional campaign that highlighted the benefits of a particular commercial industry—in this case, concrete used in construction. But the Horizon

Homes Program went further than the Blue Star program. It didn't just honor qualifying homes with a prestigious label; it was a full-scale nationwide annual competition.

The Horizon Homes Program launched in 1961 as a joint partnership between the National Concrete Masonry Association, the National Ready-Mixed Concrete Association, and the Portland Cement Association, and it ran through 1965. Its goal was to demonstrate the versatility and suitability of concrete as a modern building material enabling the construction of high-quality, livable homes at affordable prices. It promised to amplify the builder's merchandising and marketing efforts by tying their work in with a major national promotion funded by the program's concrete industry sponsors. If he stuck to the program's guidelines, Gibson could count on raising his company's profile as a result of the publicity he would expect to receive through the program, especially if his entry were to win an award. Each year one home would be crowned the national winner and seven would be named the best in their region. In 1964 the top prize was a three-week trip for two to anywhere in the world. Each regional winner would be awarded $500 and a plaque.

To qualify, the builder had to adhere to some basic criteria: (1) They had to be a member in good standing of the National Association of Home Builders. (2) The home had to be shown to the public as a model Horizon Home for at least ten consecutive days once it was completed. (3) The exterior wall surface of the house had to be constructed of at least 51 percent concrete or concrete products; the driveway, sidewalk, and at least one other feature and site improvement had to be made of concrete as well. (4) Finally, the construction cost of the home had to be under $25,000. These homes were meant to be affordable for the general public. Twenty-five thousand dollars in 1964 compares to about $270,000 today.[1]

Arkansas had three houses constructed as part of the Horizon Homes Program. A Ranch Style home in North Little Rock was a Horizon Home in 1961, the first year of the program. It was built by developer John Toland to help promote his new residential development, Arrowhead Manor. Richard W. Groh was the architect. In 1963, Arkansas had its first regional winner—architect Robert Wanslow won the $500 South Central Region award for the design of his own home in Fort Smith. In 1964, Gibson & Company's Blue Star / Horizon Home, sponsored by Arkla, became the third Arkansas entry in the national program.

[1] https://www.calculator.net/inflation-calculator.html

F. Eugene Withrow

Frank Eugene Withrow was the architect, and he had to design the house around the specifications of both the Blue Star Homes and the Horizon Homes programs. Withrow was up to the task. This 39-year-old native of Little Rock had served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from 1943 to 1945, then earned his Bachelor of Architecture degree from Washington University in 1950. He started his own architecture firm in 1954, and his first big project was the Tower Building in downtown Little Rock, where, between 1958 and 1960, he collaborated with Dallas architect Harold A. Berry to design the tallest building in Arkansas at the time. In addition to houses, Gene Withrow would go on to design many other buildings around the state in the late 1960s, such as Western Hills Elementary School in Little Rock, Newton County Hospital in Jasper, Woodruff County Hospital in McCrory, and an addition to the Lee County Courthouse in Marianna.

So in 1964, when he was commissioned to design the Blue Star / Horizon Home, Withrow was already an accomplished architect in a very fertile and productive period of his career. This wasn't just going to be a generic suburban house. Withrow's job was to produce a cutting-edge, stylish, modern home that would showcase the benefits of concrete and natural gas appliances in the best light, as well as elevating the profiles of Gibson & Company and his own architectural talents.

Architecture and Construction of the Home

Withrow produced a masterful interpretation of Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired style. Characteristics that mark this house as Wrightian are its horizontal emphasis with a long, low profile; the roof and its broad, overhanging eaves as character-defining features; the plastered appearance of the house's concrete panels; and the contrasting textures in the home's materials. The home spreads across three lots, nestled against the hillside rather than standing out vertically from it. This harmonious relationship with nature and the openness between the interior and exterior environment through the large windows also speak Wright's architectural language.

You may be looking at the house and thinking, "Okay, I do see some concrete, but I see a lot of brick, too." Ah, but look again. Even the "bricks" are cast concrete, which helped the house qualify for the Horizon Home contest. The house itself is built on a cast-concrete foundation,

has cast-concrete panel walls, and a cast-concrete balcony. The interior has terrazzo floors (which qualify as a concrete product). And even the concrete driveway contributed to the Horizon Home designation.

When the home was completed in June 1964, it was opened to the public for tours and open house viewings for ten days, accompanied by heavy advertising in the local papers. Articles in the papers gushed about the home's thoughtful design and cutting-edge modernity.

Horizon Homes Regional Winner

Visitors weren't the only ones impressed. In November 1964, Gibson & Company's Blue Star / Horizon Home was announced as the South Central Region winner in the annual competition. John Gibson and Gene Withrow were both recognized and awarded plaques, and Gibson received the $500 prize.

A House Becomes a Home

Having accomplished the promotional agenda of the various business interests that had invested in it, the house was now ready to serve its long-term purpose as a private home. Arkla Gas is said to have built it with the intention of housing the head of their meter division in it when he was to be transferred from Chicago. But the transfer did not happen, so the home was eventually sold. The first homeowners were Wes and Virginia Hall and their family, the owners of the Minute Man charcoal burger restaurant chain.

The Halls sold the home in 1971 to Dr. Robin Jones, who lived here for over fifty years. Dr. Jones must have been an interesting guy. He filled the home with collections of Russian or Greek Orthodox icons and casino slot machines. He kept numerous animals, including dogs and birds. He kept the birds in a greenhouse that he added to the back of the home. In 1988, a cockatoo, two parrots, and two other exotic birds were stolen out of the greenhouse while Jones was away on a trip.

Historic Preservation

After Jones died in 2023, the present owner, Nathan Smith, purchased the home. Smith is enthusiastic about the architecture and the history of this house, and he is taking pains to preserve this treasure. One of his early orders of business was to work with our office to get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was listed under Criterion C for locally significant architecture.

He has also undertaken a substantial project of restoring and preserving the historic character of the home. This involves repairing parts of that have deteriorated due to deferred maintenance and reverting some altered portions of the house to more historic appearances. For example, the greenhouse is now gone. Ornate interior furnishings like hanging light fixtures are being changed out for styles more in tune with the sleek Mid-century Modern aesthetic of the house.

Other areas that had been altered won't be restored to the original design, but they are being reimagined in more historically compatible styles. For example, the home as originally built had an open carport right here; it didn't have this overhanging carport. But that was converted into a room very early on and this shelter was added in a manner that's one hundred percent congruent with the design of the house, so that will stay. But Smith is renovating the interior. Be sure to ask him about some of the updates he is doing.

Conclusion and Tour

Now we invite you to tour the home! Feel free to look around in the rooms that are open for the tour. Nathan Smith will be around if you have any questions as you go through the house. One thing I want to mention is that the hallway to your right as you go up the stairs usually has cats living in it, so please be aware of that if you are allergic to cats.

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responsible for the identification, evaluation, registration and preservation of the state's cultural resources.
Arkansas Heritage is a division of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism.

This material was produced with assistance from the Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Interior.

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