

# Sandwiching in History Tour

## Hinderliter House

Historic Arkansas Museum  
200 E 3rd St, Little Rock

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*Special thanks to: Amy Milliken,  
Victoria Chandler, and the rest of the HAM staff*



Hi! I'm Ashley Sides. For Sandwiching in History today, we've got a very special house that takes us back to Little Rock's earliest days.

You know cities are always changing. So in the midst of progress and modernization, how do you hold on to your roots?

That's where historic preservation comes in. And we have a perfect example of that here at the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and Cumberland Streets.

The Hinderliter House is probably the oldest building in Little Rock, and thanks to one of Arkansas's earliest historic preservation efforts, this unassuming building is still here to take us back to a time when Arkansas was just a territory, Little Rock was just a modest settlement, and this was a grog shop.

You can think of the house's history in two parts...

## **Act I—The First Century: When People Lived and Worked There**

Jesse Hinderliter moved to Little Rock from St. Louis in the mid-1820s. Having just become the capital of Arkansas Territory in 1821, the young community was attracting new settlers, but its population was still small.

Hinderliter purchased land from Chester Ashley and built his house, sometime around 1827. At the time, it was on the edge of town. You wouldn't know by looking, but it's a hewn-log house, as most buildings in Little Rock were in those early years. Log houses were less expensive to build than frame or brick houses, and besides, the skilled labor needed for those kinds of structures was in limited supply. When Hinderliter built his house, Little Rock only had about 60 buildings, and three quarters of them were built of logs like this one.

And this is the only one that survives. We know very little of the other early log buildings, because little mention was made of them at the time. They were practical, but not prestigious like frame or brick, and history forgot them. That's why the Hinderliter House is such a unique and important relic from Little Rock's early days.

It was probably built in stages. The shorter east side may have been the original part, with the west side added soon after, by 1833. The absence of logs in the central part of the structure indicates that the two sections may originally have been separate, perhaps as a dogtrot, and later joined. The weatherboard, or clapboard, siding was added early on, maybe the late 1830s, as was often done to log buildings to make them more weather-tight and so they would look more refined. The porch on the back would also have been added in the late 1830s or '40s.

As the decade of the 1830s opened, the enterprising Mr. Hinderliter probably felt pretty good about his prospects. He was establishing himself in the growing territorial capital. With this new house, he had a new home as well as a new business: He would use the upstairs as his personal quarters and boarding rooms, while running a grog shop on the ground floor. A later source also claims he operated a grocery store in the building. In addition, he owned two enslaved individuals who lived there and worked on the grounds. Hinderliter married Sophia Chandler in 1828 and they probably dreamed of long-term plans. But his newly built house would go on to fare better than his family. Mrs. Hinderliter died in 1831. They had no children.

Meanwhile, running a grog shop brought its own challenges. Grog refers to alcoholic beverages, and a grog shop is just another term for tavern or bar. In 1833, after having too much to drink, two men broke into Hinderliter's house and attacked him. As they struggled, Hinderliter stabbed and killed one of the intruders. The other one escaped. Hinderliter turned himself in to the authorities but was acquitted because he had acted out of self-defense.

Hinderliter himself, though, died in 1834. At his death he still owed \$128 on the lots he had purchased from Chester Ashley. Ashley reacquired the property and the house was rented out

for a while. It changed owners several times over the succeeding decades and was put to a variety of uses.

It continued to be used as a tavern or boarding house for the most part. But for a brief period in the late 1860s or '70s the School for the Deaf met there. By the mid-1880s the building had become tenements with a restaurant, and part of it had a laundry business. But that area had become a seedy neighborhood known for murders and a red-light district, with the old Hinderliter place hosting ladies of the night.

Despite the neighborhood's bad reputation at the turn of the twentieth century, the Hinderliter house did enjoy celebrity in one respect. Popular legend held that back in 1835, the old grog shop had been the meeting place of the last territorial legislature before Arkansas statehood. That's how an old-timer named William Pope remembered it in his recollections of *Early Days in Arkansas*, published in 1895.

Historians are skeptical of this claim, since all the documentary evidence from 1835 indicates that the territorial legislature was meeting in church buildings. But legends are powerful things. And by the 1930s, as the curtain was falling on Act I of the history of this dilapidated, 100-year-old building, it would be this legend that would raise the curtain for an Act II.

## **Act II—Preserving and Interpreting the Hinderliter House**

The Hinderliter House that we see today does not look like the building shown in old photographs from the 1930s. It looks like the original grog shop from the 1830s. Or at least it's supposed to. I asked Victoria Chandler from the Historic Arkansas Museum to shed some light on the Hinderliter House's remarkable transformation and how it became a core part of the institution now called the Historic Arkansas Museum.

CHANDLER

How it looks today is kind of a good representation of what it would have looked like in the 1830s but I think it's really important that this building was continually inhabited up until the 1930s.

SIDES

In other words, it had evolved a lot over one hundred years as people put it to different uses. But by the 1930s, it looked like the end of the road for the Hinderliter House and the other buildings on this run-down block of town.

CHANDLER

Everyone wanted this spot to be demoed and have new buildings brought up on it.

## SIDES

But one woman with a vision spearheaded a preservation effort to save these old buildings and try to restore them to how they looked in the territorial period, so the public could visit them as a museum. And she started with the Hinderliter.

## CHANDLER

Louise Loughborough is kind of the founder of the Arkansas Territorial Restoration—now Historic Arkansas Museum—but she really is the pioneer of preservation for the state. She worked with the group that preserved the Old State House building. You know, she comes from a long line of Arkansas families; you know, her grandfathers and great-grandfathers would have known Jesse Hinderliter and lived during this time, so she's not very far removed.

She was a big champion for historic preservation. There were a bunch of groups that were touring the country looking at other places. Colonial Williamsburg, of course, opened up in the early 1900s, and she visited there. And that sparked something inside of her as a goal for what she could do to Arkansas.

And it's very appropriate because Hinderliter is the whole reason we have the museum that we have today. She thought of it as being at the city of the three capitols: the current capitol we have, the Old State House, and this building, which at the time it was erroneously believed that it was the last meeting for the Arkansas Territorial Convention and the signing of the constitution, which that didn't happen here! But that was, you know, kind of widely reported at the time. And so she championed it as a city of three capitols and thought she'd make the block like Colonial Williamsburg. And so this effort to restore Blocks 31, 32, and 33 was the first full-scale effort in the state to preserve not a singular site but multiple structures. She single-handedly raised funds and lobbied the state legislature to save this block, and specifically she started with this structure.

She partnered with Max Mayer, who was an architect (He built several houses and some are on the National Register. There's some in Hillcrest and some other neighborhoods in town), and together they kind of have this plan for restoring what would be the Arkansas Territorial Restoration. They thought they were restoring the 1830s—like 1835—the last meeting of the territorial legislature—I think that's the date they were going for in their head.

## SIDES

But there are no photographs from those early days. No drawings. There was very little in the way of description. So Loughborough and Mayer had to base their restoration on similar period buildings, on evidence preserved in the structure itself, and on their own inferences and interpretations.

## CHANDLER

At the time it was a restaurant inside and a bar; there was also a lean-to structure that had a lawyer's office; it was tenants upstairs... But there are many many windows, and the doors are different, and so we're not quite sure which— there are some— some of the windows with

their glass, they do date to the 1800s, we're not quite sure when, but they are historic. But then Max Mayer took out some, he might have— you know the windows that we do have, he might have relocated. We just don't know. His drawings frequently— he changed the layout of the windows a lot, and you can see that image of before preservation's done, and you can just kind of tell the difference.

#### SIDES

There are features of the building that are known to be from the early period. Dendrochronology readings have dated some of the logs to 1832 or before.

#### CHANDLER

So we know at least the log structure was here at that point. We're in the grog shop room and what you can see: the walled boards are from the 1830s or '20s. Some of the beams on the ceiling date from that period. Another thing that dates 1800s: the mantle in the dining room—that Empire-style mantle—is from the 1830s. And then more of the floor—or wall boards—upstairs, in addition to the ceiling components. Those are original.

#### SIDES

So the Hinderliter House can take us back to Arkansas's territorial days. And that's what Mrs. Loughborough was trying to restore when she thought that it had been the territorial capitol in 1835. But *every* era has left its imprint on the house. Not least of all Loughborough's own preservation work with the Territorial Restoration. That's now a *very* significant part of this house's history.

#### CHANDLER

We're now on the National Register as a historic district, but we're not for the reasons people think. People, you know, would think, "Oh this historic block." We're actually on the register because of the preservation efforts of Louise Loughborough. So we're on the register classified for the 1930s, which is very appropriate for this building, because so much of this is a question of what is from the 1830s or from the 1930s or any time in between there, because it's been inhabited that entire period.

You know, the goal of this originally—this whole institution—was to save this capitol building. And it's interesting how that's really shifted. You know, eighty-one years now we've been a museum. That's a really long time! It's generations of different ideas and missions and purposes...

We're working with a historic architect right now, and we've had this initial conversation. He's like, you'll have to make a decision of how you're going to preserve this building: Is it the building from the 1830s or is it the 1930s restoration project? And we are leaning now towards the 1930s, because the elements that are the 1830s we have identified and we can work to preserve those, and that falls in line with the mission of the 1930s preservation efforts.

But you know Jesse Hinderliter died and then this building didn't remain vacant. It was quickly inhabited. Improvements were constantly made. You know, some things might date to the 1840s; that's also worth preserving! And so I think historic site museums get in this tricky business—and preservation also—if you stick to this one date, you have to sacrifice the other years. And it's all important! I think that's a big thing, is that we've remained a historic block of downtown, and we want to tell the story of downtown Little Rock. And kind of having this flexible time frame from the 1830s to the 1930s—this hundred years—gives us a lot to interpret. But we are focusing on the 1930s preservation of treating this building through that lens—which of course factors into the early 1830s, but it's really focused on that period.

#### SIDES

So the Hinderliter House and the other buildings at the Historic Arkansas Museum still have a lot more to teach us about Little Rock history. But we're going to have to be patient for some of it. Especially in the case of the Hinderliter. It's closed to the public right now while it undergoes some much-needed preservation work.

#### CHANDLER

We have a big drainage issue on the grounds over here, and we've had it for years. We're working to put in a French drain system to kind of help filter off some of the water. But that's caused the issues of the floorboards in here— we're not quite sure— we don't think the whole foundation is rotting, but there are definitely sections where it needs to be addressed. But the porch right now, because of the water drainage issue, the joists are rotting a little bit. It's just not safe to have so many visitors, you know, especially with school groups; you get a lot of those coming in. It's just too much, so we've closed off Hinderliter for now, we've taken out most of the objects, and hopefully by the end of this month we're going to have a progress report of where we're going from here.

We are lucky that we have the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources grant, and that helps to fund the rehabilitation of structures like this, and so we'll be working on that over the next couple years.

#### SIDES

It's a big responsibility to be a steward of such an important piece of Arkansas history. And the folks at Historic Arkansas Museum take it very seriously. It's fascinating to see how their approach to the Hinderliter House has evolved since Loughborough's time, as they do their best to preserve it for the public and interpret its history and purpose.

#### CHANDLER

If you think you have the final say or answer in this field, you're wrong. I mean, you have to be constantly evolving. And there's just new things— every day we learn new practices and materials to use. You know, we discover things that we used to use for preservation are not safe anymore. They're just constantly changing. And especially, you know, we have to preserve the structure, but we also want to use it. It's been a shame that we've had to close the building,

but it's better in the long run. But if, say, we had to close it for, you know, more than a couple of years... Plus like then it's just... how much is it worth doing it?

These buildings are first objects in our collection here. We don't accession them, but they're first objects and that's the reason why we're a museum. And so we definitely treat them as objects first. What we're all making an effort to do in Hinderliter—we already have this partly—but we are trying to fill the houses with reproductions. This is also so we can have more engaging activities. We want people to be able to sit down, eventually they can jump on the beds, do whatever; they'll really experience all the sensory parts of living in one of these buildings at the time.

#### SIDES

That'll be something to look forward to.

The Hinderliter's future promises to be as exciting as its past. Rather than being frozen in a moment in time, this building tells stories from many eras, as its history continues to be written.

Thanks for watching our virtual Sandwiching in History tour of the Hinderliter House. I hope you'll come back next month when our tour takes us to the Engelberger House, one of only two Queen Anne-style houses in North Little Rock. Not only is it beautiful; it's got a fascinating history. And you'll only get to see it in our virtual tour. I look forward to seeing you then.

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