



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour
Old VA Hospital (The Flats at SoMa)**

231 E 25th St, Little Rock

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By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Pace Burt, Julie Rains, and Sara Saleemuddin



*Former Veterans Administration Hospital, now the Flats at SoMa, Little Rock
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2025*

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to The Flats at SoMa, historically known as the old Little Rock VA Hospital. I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thanks for joining us today! I'd like to give special thanks to the property owner, Pace Burt, for saying yes when I asked if we could do this tour, and to the property managers, Julie Rains and Sara Saleemuddin, for kindly working with me to set this tour up for you all.

I'll start by sharing the history of this place, and then you'll get to walk around and see it for yourself.

The Postwar Need for Veteran Care and the Selection of Little Rock for a New Hospital

World War II dramatically increased the already growing need for expanded healthcare services through the Veterans Administration. The veteran population jumped from about 4 million to nearly 20 million. In response, the VA launched a major hospital construction program. Announced in 1946 and continuing through 1958, it resulted in more than 50 new facilities across the country.

Historians call this the “third generation” of VA hospital construction. Earlier VA hospitals tended to be sprawling, multi-building campuses in rural settings. But the postwar hospitals followed mid-twentieth-century ideals: smaller urban complexes, located near medical schools, and centered around a large high-rise main building.¹

This Little Rock facility was one of the early examples of that third generation. In 1945, rumors circulated that the federal government was planning a nationwide VA expansion and that Little Rock was being considered. The Chamber of Commerce and other local groups jumped into action, and by June 1946, President Truman had approved this site on Roosevelt Road.² The federal government purchased the 16-acre, hilltop property from wholesale grocer George Porbeck for a reported \$66,000.³

¹ Lindsay Hannah, “United States Third Generation Veterans Hospitals, 1946-1958,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016), revised 2018, accessed at <https://www.cfm.va.gov/historic/UnitedStatesThirdGenerationVeteransHospitals-1946-1958-MPSsigned.pdf>, E1-E9.

² Mark Boatner, “Arkansas’s Newest Hospital for Vets,” *Arkansas Gazette*, October 1, 1950, 49; “New Veterans Administration Hospital to be Formally Opened, Dedicated Today,” *Arkansas Democrat*, November 26, 1950, 74.

³ “Objection Seen to Making Park Hospital Site,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 16, 1947, 1.

A Desired Relationship with the Medical School

The challenge was that this location wasn't as close to the medical school as the VA—or the University of Arkansas—wanted. At the time, the University of Arkansas Medical School (UAMS) sat next to MacArthur Park, where the UALR School of Law is today.⁴

In 1947, a brief but intense controversy erupted when a VA official visited from Washington at the invitation of the university's Board of Trustees. They wanted him to consider building the hospital next to the medical school on part of MacArthur Park. The VA representative and the trustees even met with the city council to pitch the idea. They believed the VA hospital would benefit from being next to the medical school, and that the partnership could grow into a full medical center—bringing millions of dollars in research grants to the local economy.

It was a visionary idea, but the thought of carving up MacArthur Park caused an uproar. Citizens and city leaders didn't want to touch the historic park, and legally they probably couldn't anyway. Congress had deeded it to the city in 1892 with the requirement that it be “forever exclusively devoted” to public park use.

And George Porbeck was furious. The VA official had called the Roosevelt Road property “undesirable for hospital purposes” and implied they had only taken an option to buy it and were ready to back out. Porbeck insisted, “The government has taken advantage of its option, and although I haven't received any money, all papers are in Washington and the confirmation of acceptance has been signed.” He added, “I did not attempt to sell my property to the government; they came and asked to buy it and I bought additional sites to round out the area they desired. I have had my money tied up and I dislike being told in so many words that I attempted to hand a lemon to the government.”⁵

In the end, the whole kerfuffle turned out to be a tempest in a teapot. A VA spokesperson quickly announced that the hospital would be built on Roosevelt Road as planned.⁶ They later clarified that MacArthur Park *would* have been their first choice if it had been available:

⁴ Jerry Puryear, “University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS),” CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/university-of-arkansas-for-medical-sciences-uams-2395/>.

⁵ “Objection,” 1,17; “Hospital Site Matter Left in Confusion,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 17, 1947, 1; “VA Release on Hospital Not Explained,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 18, 1947, 12.

⁶ “Hospital Site Matter Left in Confusion,” 1; “VA Release on Hospital Not Explained,” 12.

“We decided to build our 127th hospital in Little Rock because the Medical School was there. We wanted the park site but were advised that the people didn't want to surrender it. So we accepted the Porbeck property as a second choice. The park area would make for a better hospital. It is directly across the street from the Medical School. We have found it advisable to save our doctors' time in going from one institution to the other. It increases efficiency. But we must admit there are other considerations than those of the Veterans Administration. People of Little Rock may have other ideas. Wishes of the people must be considered. There is no intention to move the Veterans' hospital from Little Rock unless the Medical School is moved. Without the school, ours would be just another hospital. ... Little Rock need not worry about losing the hospital if the Medical School remains there.”⁷

That last comment hinted at a real concern: the University of Arkansas Board of Trustees was considering moving the medical school out of Little Rock. Hot Springs was very interested in hosting it. Because of the uncertainty, the VA paused architectural planning until the medical school's future location was settled—they were prepared to follow it to Hot Springs if needed.⁸ Ultimately, UAMS stayed in Little Rock, and the VA hospital was built here on Roosevelt Road. But the desire to be next to the medical school never went away.

The New Hospital's Impressive Architecture and Specifications

Construction began in 1948 and wrapped up in 1950. The building's striking design drew immediate attention, just as it still does today. It was designed by two Little Rock firms working in partnership: Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen and Erhart, Eichenbaum & Rauch.

Architecturally, the building is International Style, a modernist approach that dominated commercial architecture from the 1920s through the 1970s. It wasn't a single look so much as a set of design principles that allowed for a variety of expressions.

⁷ John L. Fletcher, “VA Wants Park but Would Use Roosevelt Site,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 18, 1947, 1.

⁸ “VA Hospital Plans to Be Held Up,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 27, 1947, 1; “Board Likely to Determine Hospital Site,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 18, 1947, 1.

First, the International Style approached architecture as a volume instead of a mass. Structures were built from an internal steel or reinforced-concrete frame out, and the façade and walls were hung or attached to the frame—kind of like skin on a skeleton—rather than the walls themselves being the support. In this hospital, that reinforced-concrete frame allowed for open, flexible floor areas.

Secondly, the International Style emphasized regularity in a building's façade, following the internal structure. In this building, the windows follow a repeating pattern within horizontal bands, broken up by periodic blind openings that reflect the underlying concrete structure.

Finally, the style avoids unnecessary ornament. Where decorative elements appear, they serve a purpose—like the round openings in the concrete walls around the loading dock that allow airflow. Inside, the marble reception counter, marble and glazed-tile walls, and stainless-steel pillars weren't just aesthetic choices; smooth stone and steel were considered more hygienic for a medical setting.⁹

But International Style could be expressed in many ways. Large buildings often ended up as simple boxy forms—think of your stereotypical rectangular modern skyscraper. So why did the architects choose this more avant-garde design with its graceful curves and Y-shaped footprint? If you look at it from above, the building kind of looks like a wishbone. Why is that?

Again, practicality. The Y-shaped plan maximized southern and eastern sunlight in patient rooms, which was believed to aid recovery.

It also increased the number of rooms with scenic views—made even more spectacular thanks to the 60-foot rise that the building sits atop. Yes, they took intentional advantage of the landscape too. The Y layout allowed efficient access to all wings from the central mechanical core, where elevators and nursing stations were concentrated.¹⁰

⁹ Antoinette Johnson and J. Mason Toms, "Veterans Administration Hospital," National Register of Historic Places nomination form (Department of the Interior, 2021), 8:14-16.

¹⁰ Johnson and Toms, "Veterans Administration Hospital," 7:4-5.

Construction was carried out by the Patti-McDonald-Manhattan Company, a collaboration of firms from Kansas City, St. Louis, and Muskogee, Oklahoma.¹¹ The final price tag came to \$11 million.¹² The hospital was completed in August 1950 and formally opened on November 26 of that year.¹³ The building received acclaim in Little Rock's design community and was featured in a couple of national design magazines: *Architectural Record* and *Architecture and Design*.¹⁴

At the time, the hospital was considered technologically advanced. While only the operating rooms were air conditioned at first, the rest of the facility relied on aluminum-framed awning windows to circulate air— which was common before central HVAC was widely adopted in hospitals. A chilled-water air conditioning system was later retrofitted in 1963, which required lowering the ceilings on patient floors to accommodate ductwork and reduce the amount of space needing to be cooled.¹⁵

The building has 11 stories with a basement. The ground and second floors held administrative offices. Floors 3 through 8 housed general nursing units of 40 beds each, with operating suites on Floor 5. Floors 9 and 10 contained psychiatric wards which had access to safely screened-in outdoor decks.¹⁶ The central elevator tower rises two additional stories for machinery. In total, the hospital opened with 514 beds.¹⁷ Several ancillary buildings—staff housing, a laundry, a heating plant, and a shop—once stood on the eastern part of the campus, though most have been altered or demolished.¹⁸

Old Before Its Time: The Facilities Soon Prove Inadequate

In the 1960s, the Little Rock and North Little Rock VA hospitals strengthened their ties with the University of Arkansas Medical School. They became “dean’s committee” hospitals,

¹¹ Johnson and Toms, “Veterans Administration Hospital,” 7:5; Mark Boatner, “Arkansas’s Newest Hospital for Vets,” *Arkansas Gazette*, October 1, 1950, 49.

¹² Boatner, “Arkansas’s Newest Hospital for Vets,” 49.

¹³ Boatner, “Arkansas’s Newest Hospital for Vets,” 49; “New Veterans Administration Hospital,” 74.

¹⁴ Johnson and Toms, “Veterans Administration Hospital,” 8:17; “VA Hospital at Little Rock Slated for June Occupancy,” *Architectural Record*, Vol. 17, No. 3, March 1950, Pg. 12, <https://www.usmodernist.org/AR/AR-1950-03.pdf>.

¹⁵ Johnson and Toms, “Veterans Administration Hospital,” 7:8.

¹⁶ Johnson and Toms, “Veterans Administration Hospital,” 8:16-17.

¹⁷ “New Veterans Administration Hospital,” 74.

¹⁸ Johnson and Toms, “Veterans Administration Hospital,” 7:7-8.

meaning VA doctors and researchers were hired by a committee chaired by the medical school dean. VA staff also received faculty appointments at the medical school, which gave them a chance not only to practice medicine but to pursue research. This attracted highly qualified physicians and scientists to the VA *and* improved the quality of the medical school faculty. Medical students gained access to a large general hospital for training. It was seen as a “beneficial symbiosis,” reflecting the VA’s growing commitment to joining hospitals with medical schools.¹⁹ As a result of this relationship, the Little Rock VA hospital was considered “one of the best of the 125 VA general medical hospitals in terms of patient care.”²⁰

The problem was that the building itself wasn’t designed for teaching or research. It lacked space for study, conferences, and expanding services. It was crowded, because modern medical care had become more complex. Treating a single patient required more time and more staff than in 1950. Resources were limited. So you might have to squeeze past patients lined up in the hallway as they waited their turn for an X-ray. The building had been “designed according to the old theory of one doctor for each 40-patient ward, with very slow patient turnover and no teaching or research.” Or, as Chief of Surgery Dr. Raymond Read put it, the hospital was “designed to be a little old sleepy VA hospital. Apart from this,” he said, “I think we have a wonderful hospital here.”²¹

And the distance from the medical school—already a concern in the 1940s—had only gotten worse. UAMS moved from MacArthur Park to its current West Markham location in 1956, creating a 15-minute commute between the two facilities.²²

Dr. Eugene J. Towbin, the Little Rock VA Hospital’s chief of staff, campaigned tirelessly from at least 1968 to build a new VA hospital fully integrated with the medical school.²³ It was an uphill battle. Besides the cost, he saw public perception as the major obstacle. “The biggest problem,” he said, “is that the public sees our lovely building from the outside. And it is a lovely physical plant, but inside it’s really inadequate.”²⁴

¹⁹ Martin Kirby, “Medicine Is Joint Endeavor of UA and VA,” *Arkansas Democrat*, May 27, 1970, 1-2.

²⁰ Martin Kirby, “It’s Short on Space but Not on Care,” *Arkansas Democrat*, May 28, 1970, 1.

²¹ Kirby, “It’s Short on Space,” 1,3.

²² Kirby, “It’s Short on Space,” 3.

²³ Martin Kirby, “New Veterans’ Hospital Asked,” *Arkansas Democrat*, May 29, 1970, 1,11.

²⁴ Al May, “Consultants Recommend New VA Hospital,” *Arkansas Democrat*, February 25, 1976, 6B.

The dream took years to materialize. Senator John L. McClellan supported the effort and secured federal funding in the early 1970s. He died in 1977 before seeing it realized. When the new VA hospital finally did open next to UAMS in 1984, it was named the John L. McClellan Memorial Veterans Hospital.

Departure of the VA and New Uses Under New Owners

After the VA moved out, the Roosevelt Road building sat vacant for about a decade. Pulaski County acquired it in 1995, and Hobby Lobby Creative Centers bought it in 1998. Hobby Lobby donated the property to the Institute in Basic Life Principles in 1999. The organization used it for about 20 years as a training center for its Bible-based courses. Meanwhile, in 2002, the Little Rock Police Department's Downtown Patrol and Special Operations moved into the second floor of the northwest wing.²⁵

In 2020, the Institute in Basic Life Principles sold the property to Princeton Place Apartments, LLC, owned by Georgia-based developer Pace Burt, who specializes in historic conversions. Burt envisioned transforming the former 500-bed hospital into 168 luxury apartments, taking advantage of the revitalized South Main Street district, or SoMa. The Flats at SoMa officially opened last year and already have many residents. The police substation remains in its corner of the second floor, and just a couple of months ago, the historic preservation nonprofit Preserve Arkansas moved its office into the building as well.

Reconfigurations and Renovations

There have been several alterations since the hospital days, especially inside. The Institute in Basic Life Principles remodeled the first two floors for their offices. They removed the modernist first-floor circular admissions desk and sitting area and installed traditional wood wainscot paneling over the walls and stainless-steel columns. They gutted the third floor but never finished it, and they converted the fourth floor into residential units. Exterior changes included replacing the historic windows with vinyl and altering some modernist entrance features to more traditional styles.²⁶

²⁵ Johnson and Toms, "Veterans Administration Hospital," 8:18; Linda S. Caillouet, "Ministry Year into Job Fixing Old VA Hospital," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, February 25, 2001, 1B,9B.

²⁶ Johnson and Toms, "Veterans Administration Hospital," 7:9, 8:18.

The police department has transformed their space into traditional municipal offices, completing its most recent renovations within the last year or so, I believe.

The Flats at SoMa

With The Flats at SoMa, Pace Burt and business partner Rick Goddard have carried out the most extensive redevelopment of the former hospital so far. It's a strong example of adaptive reuse—repurposing a historic property to meet a modern need. Turning a hospital into apartments is a natural fit, but redeveloping a structure this large is a massive financial undertaking. One reported cost estimate was \$35 million, covering not only the visible changes to the interior and historically sensitive window replacements, but also asbestos abatement and lead-paint remediation.

To make the project viable, Burt and Goddard relied on state and federal historic tax credits. That required the property's 2021 nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, a process involving a rigorous analysis of its historic integrity and significance.²⁷ And just one week ago, the Flats at SoMa project won a prestigious award from Preserve Arkansas for Excellence in Preservation through Rehabilitation.

One major challenge was the “clinical nature” of the original construction. Converting patient rooms into apartments required completely gutting the interior systems—electrical, plumbing, HVAC. But the International Style's principle of “volume over mass” helped, because the non-load-bearing interior partitions could be removed to create open floorplans of various sizes. Each apartment now spans what would have been multiple patient rooms or wards. As you walk down a residential hallway, you can still see where the original doorways were, though most are filled in since each apartment only needs one entrance. Other original features—historic drinking fountains, mail chutes, and a laundry chute—remain in place, even

²⁷ George Waldon, “Flats at SoMa: VA Hospital-Turned-Housing Redevelopment Set to Open Summer 2024,” ArkansasBusiness.com, <https://www.arkansasbusiness.com/article/flats-at-soma-va-hospital-turned-housing-redevelopment-set-to-open-summer-2024/>; Ashley Godwin, “Contractor Says Renovation of Old Little Rock VA Hospital into Apartments to Be Complete Next Year,” THV11.com, <https://www.thv11.com/article/news/local/old-little-rock-va-hospital-renovated-into-apartments-nearly-complete/91-c1b3024a-ab6b-408e-aa0e-7172248f0345>.

though they no longer function. Some original floor and wall tiles were also retained where possible.

The lobby and first floor have been dramatically restyled, to the point that it's hard to picture the original hospital layout. Much of that historic integrity had already been lost through earlier renovations by the Institute in Basic Life Principles. But you can try to imagine it. The admissions desk once stood near where the gear garage is now. A nearby waiting area with chairs partitioned off with vertical stainless-steel louvers and a marble planter curving around a column. Some of the walls have been reconfigured, and of course the décor is completely different from the hospital's stainless-steel-and-marble aesthetic. But the two leftmost elevators are original, even though their modernist fluted stainless-steel surrounds are gone. Those two elevators no longer work—you'll use the modern ones on the right—but the original freight elevator still does.

And yet despite the visible changes, the spirit of health and wellness is still alive here, just in new ways. As you explore the first-floor common areas and the grounds, you'll see a Roman pool, sauna, fitness center, pickleball court, yoga room, and a "gear garage" where residents can rent outdoor equipment like bicycles, tents, and hiking gear.

Conclusion

The Veterans Administration Hospital on Roosevelt Road has evolved from a healthcare facility for returning World War II veterans into a cornerstone of urban residential renewal. Its International Style design—once the height of medical modernism—has proven flexible enough to serve a new generation of Little Rock residents. Through historic tax credits and a commitment to adaptive reuse, this 11-story landmark still dominates the hilltop, offering the same inspiring views to residents that were once curated for patients. Its preservation ensures that the legacy of Dr. Eugene Towbin, the artistry of firms like Brueggeman, Swaim & Allen and Erhart, Eichenbaum & Rauch, and the federal commitment to veterans remain a visible part of the Arkansas landscape.

In a moment we will invite questions for the Flats at SoMa management and leasing staff and let you explore portions of the property on your own. But first I want to plug our next tour, because it's a special one. As you know, this year is 250th anniversary of the American

Revolution, and we have a place in Arkansas that experienced the Revolutionary War. So, on March 6th we'll be at Arkansas Post Museum State Park to tell you the fascinating story of Arkansas Post. We'll meet at noon like always, but this time the program will start with the unveiling of a special Arkansas250 historical marker for Arkansas Post prior to our regular tour presentation.

Now let's open it up for questions or comments. I'm sure some of you have memories of this place from the old days!

If you'd like to explore The Flats at SoMa and see how it has transformed since the VA Hospital days, you're welcome to walk around the permitted areas. This is a residential building, so please respect the signs indicating where you can and can't go. You can self-tour as far as the elevators and the yoga room and peek into the gym. Please don't walk around the exterior beyond the parking lot and pool, since that area includes a construction zone and the police department. You're also welcome to visit the 10th floor to see a model unit and experience the sky lounge and its breathtaking view of downtown Little Rock.

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