

Sandwiching in History
St. Joseph's Home
6800 Camp Robinson Rd., NLR
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of St. Joseph's Home! I've been really excited about today's tour. Many of you have admired this building from afar for years, and today may be the first time you've actually gotten to come inside. So it's going to be fun. Before we get started, I'd like to thank everyone with St. Joseph Center of Arkansas, Inc.—in particular, Sandy DeCoursey and Kristy Eanes—for allowing us to tour the building and for their help gathering information. In addition, Mr. Julius Greb is with us today to answer any questions that I cannot. Mr. Greb has worked for St. Joseph's since 1956.

St. Joseph's Home (or St. Joseph's Orphanage or St. Joseph's Children's Home) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

Bishop John Baptist Morris

John Baptist Morris was born in 1866 near Hendersonville, TN. After studying at St. Mary's College in Lebanon, KY, he decided to enter the priesthood. He studied in Rome and was ordained in 1892. In June 1906 Morris was named coadjutor bishop for the Diocese of Little Rock, meaning that he would serve as assistant

bishop and later assume the full role of bishop (after the current bishop's retirement, removal, or death). Little Rock's second Catholic bishop, Edward M. Fitzgerald, suffered a stroke in 1900 and spent the last seven years of his life in St. Joseph's Hospital in Hot Springs. Bishop Fitzgerald died on February 21, 1907, and John Baptist Morris immediately became the third Catholic bishop of Little Rock (Diocese of LR consists of the entire state of Arkansas).

When Bishop Fitzgerald died, he left the diocese with considerable financial reserves. And Bishop Morris quickly set out to use this money to expand Catholic institutions and social services. In addition to founding St. Joseph's Orphanage, Bishop Morris started LR College in 1908 (Catholic college), St. John's Seminary in LR in 1911, and St. Raphael's Orphanage in Pine Bluff (for African-Americans) in 1932. Under Bishop Morris's direction, in 1908 Mount St. Mary Academy completed a new main building in Pulaski Heights (and moved from their downtown location at 6th & Louisiana to the Heights that year; main building demolished in 1983). Bishop Morris once said, "No church can hope for permanent success or growth that does not actively identify itself with works of charity," and that is what he set out to do when he built St. Joseph's Home.

[Bishop Morris died on October 22, 1946, and is buried in the crypt below St. Andrew's Catholic Cathedral in LR.]

St. Joseph's Home

In 1907 the Catholic Diocese of LR, under the direction of Bishop Morris, purchased 720 acres of land about 5 miles north of Argenta for an orphanage (Argenta annexed by LR in 1890 & became the 8th Ward of LR, then NLR annexed the 8th Ward of LR, then NLR went back to Argenta in 1906, Argenta went back to NLR in 1917). Morris firmly believed that children should be raised in the country, and preferably, on a farm "in order to attain their greatest mental and physical development." In 1907 there were already a couple wood-frame buildings on the land, and children were housed in them immediately. At the request of Bishop Morris, the Benedictine Order of Saint Scholastica's convent at Shoal Creek (near Paris in Logan County, AR; by 1924 the St. Scholastica Monastery moved to Ft. Smith, where they are still active) initially sent 3 nuns to administer the orphanage, which then housed 7 children. But the number of children and nuns increased, and they needed more space.

Architecture

So in 1908 Bishop Morris commissioned well-known LR architect Charles L. Thompson to design a new building for St. Joseph's Orphanage. BTW, the orphanage was named in honor of St. Joseph because in the Bible, Joseph was the foster-father of Jesus (Jesus was the son of Mary & God), making him especially relevant to foster children.

The Colonial Revival-style building was completed in 1910 at a cost of \$150,000. It features a symmetrical façade, and the front entrance bay is crowned by a segmental arch and features cast-stone pilasters and detailing. The brick building rests on a cut-stone foundation and is topped by a red tile roof with a cupola. Round, louvered dormers are situated on the roof as well to provide ventilation for the attic space. Double-decker porches are located on the east and west ends of the building.

St. Joseph's Opens

The 56,000-square-foot building has 4 full floors with an attic and a partial basement. When it opened, this building had accommodations for 250 children. In May 1910 there were 64 children, 5 elderly people, and 10 nuns living at St. Joseph's (a portion of the building was used for the "displaced" elderly as well). St. Joseph's Home cared for both Catholic and Protestant children. The nuns started a school for orphans and the children of neighboring families. This building had classrooms, dormitory rooms, play rooms, bathrooms, administrative offices, a dining room (cafeteria), its own electric light plant, sewer system, wells and waterworks system, and large kitchen, bakery, and laundry facilities. The chapel was completed a few months after the rest of the building.

St. Joseph's was self-sufficient. In 1910 about 160 of the 720 acres were under cultivation. Another 90 acres were devoted to a fruit orchard. Bishop Morris was very interested in agriculture and often conducted agricultural experiments on the land surrounding the orphanage. And the U.S. Government maintained an agricultural experiment station on the farm for many years. There was an old farmhouse to the west of the orphanage where the farmhands lived and barns for the horses, cattle, and hogs. A house and incubator for chickens, turkeys, and ducks was located behind St. Joseph's. Eventually the number of acres under cultivation increased to over 300. The children helped with every aspect of the building's operation. They helped with the livestock, baled hay, and worked in the large garden to the NW of the building (no longer extant).

In addition to learning the “Three R’s” (reading, writing, and arithmetic), children at St. Joseph’s Home were taught practical skills. Girls learned how to sew, cook, and take care of small children. Boys learned about horticulture, farming, and animal husbandry.

A room on the 3rd floor (counting full “basement” as first) served as the infirmary when someone was sick. Local doctors and dentists provided their services free of charge. If there was a medical emergency, the individual was taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital in LR.

Throughout the years, St. Joseph’s Home received financial support from the Diocese, Arkansas’s Catholic congregations, the Knights of Columbus, private donations, and secular groups like the LR Board of Trade, the forerunner of the LR Chamber of Commerce.

WWI & Hotel Belmont

In response to the U.S. entry into World War I, the U.S. Government financed the construction of several military training posts throughout the country. In June 1917 North Little Rock was awarded one of these camps—Camp Pike (in 1937 named after U.S. Senator Joseph Taylor Robinson from AR). Construction began immediately, and because of the camp’s close proximity to St. Joseph’s Home, Bishop Morris decided to temporarily relocate the children. In 1911 the first St. John’s Seminary building was constructed at the southeast corner of 25th (Roosevelt) and State streets in LR, but in 1916 the seminary moved to N. Tyler Street in Pulaski Heights. So Bishop Morris relocated the children from St. Joseph’s to the old St. John’s Seminary building at 25th & State (still extant).

Bishop Morris leased St. Joseph’s Home and 320 acres to the Belmont Hotel Company. In August 1917 LR architect Frank Gibb was hired to retrofit the interior of the orphanage so that it could serve as a hotel (mainly for officers and their families). Gibb was also to design other structures on the property. The Missouri Pacific Railroad constructed a spur track directly into Camp Pike, and it passed behind St. Joseph’s Home. A passenger depot was constructed somewhere behind St. Joseph’s so people could easily access the Hotel Belmont. A large officers’ club was constructed nearby for entertainment. A small store, shoe shop, and cleaning and pressing shop located near St. Joseph’s to cater to military personnel as well.

In 1921 the children and nuns returned to St. Joseph's Home. Because Bishop Morris had given a large part of the 720-acre property to the military for Camp Pike, he purchased a farm near Prothro Junction in order to provide St. Joseph's with enough land to sustain itself. In 1925 St. Joseph's Home had 193 residents. By 1941 106 children lived at St. Joseph's, and there was a long waiting list (due to limited funds).

The Orphanage as an Institution

Most of the children who came to St. Joseph's were not actually orphans—in many cases, their parents could not afford to care for them, or they were from broken homes. In the early 20th century, there was a great need for places like St. Joseph's Orphanage. In 1941 there were five orphanages in the LR area—the LR Orphan's Home, 920 McGowan St. (later became the Elizabeth Mitchell Memorial Home for Children and was located in the Rogers House at 400 W. 18th St. in LR from 1960 to 1982); St. Joseph's Home; Methodist Children's Home at 1610 Elm; Arkansas Children's Home at 804 Wolfe St. (which in 1954 became AR Children's Hospital); and the Working Women's Home and Day Nursery at 103 E. 21st St.

To illustrate the great need for orphanages and the difference in social norms (particularly gender roles), I'll read you some quotes from a December 28, 1941, article in the *Arkansas Gazette* entitled "Homes for the Homeless":

"Few of the young inmates actually are orphans. Most of them are the victims of broken homes, wherein one of the parents has been lost through death, divorce, desertion or disease. The remaining parent, if a mother, is often unable to make a living for the family. If a father, he cannot cope with the double burden of providing a living for the children and caring for their physical needs."

"Most orphans never reach an institution because, when deprived of their parents, they are eagerly received by relatives. The children cared for by our splendid institutions are frequently more unfortunate than orphans because they are the victims of tragedy and poverty. But their misfortune usually ends when the friendly doors open to receive them into the happy home life of that most misunderstood of all institutions—the modern orphanage."

Another important point about St. Joseph's Orphanage—many children were not offered for adoption because they still had family in the area, and there was the hope that the parent(s) would eventually be able to reclaim them.

[The State Department of Public Welfare was created in 1935 and would evolve into the modern AR Department of Human Services in 1971. Beginning in the mid-20th century, orphanages closed and displaced children became wards of the state or were put up for adoption.]

St. Joseph's Recent Past

Social trends and ideas about child welfare changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Arkansas, Act 38 of 1971 initiated major government reorganization and created the immediate predecessor of the Arkansas Department of Human Services. The idea of an orphanage became outmoded and was abandoned in favor of foster families and adoption.

The number of children entering St. Joseph's decreased dramatically, but at the same time, more women entered the workforce and needed daycare for their children. So in 1978 St. Joseph's Home became a daycare and kindergarten. In 1997 most of the Benedictine sisters returned to their monastery, but two sisters remained at St. Joseph's until December 2007. In 2010 the Catholic Diocese signed a 50-year lease with St. Joseph Center of Arkansas, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and adaptive reuse of the century-old landmark.

St. Anne's Catholic Church still uses the building, and it is also used for church retreats. [St. Anne's Church down the road was built in 1935.]

Specific Areas of the Building

Chapel

The stained glass windows in the chapel were installed between the 1920s and 1940s as money allowed. Several of them feature children; you see Jesus with the children, Pope Pius X with the children, and the angels with the children. There is a sweet story about the window with the angels and the children. The nuns wanted to include a window with the Guardian Angel but wanted the children at St. Joseph's to help them decide what he would be doing. Since they had things of a very personal nature to discuss with the guardian angel, the children decided that there should be two guardian angels—one for the boys and one for the girls.

Light fixtures are original.

Pews and altar are not original.
 Organ is from 1962.
 Carpet installed about 2008.
 Confessional in corner.

Cellar

Boiler room with original boiler (U.S. Radiator Corp.) and “new” boiler from about 1950.

Coal chute

Canning room w/ pressure cooker—has lots of shelves for storing canned goods & a dumb-weighter from cellar up to kitchen to send up goods. Also large chopping block.

First Floor

Food preparation porch—original to building but enclosed with louvered glass in the late 1950s.

Kitchen—see skylights and kitchen equipment, walk-in freezer.

Bakery room

Laundry room—lots of old equipment, including washers, dryers, cast-iron ironing boards, pressing machine with rollers, steam iron machine.

Dining area (cafeteria)

Classrooms—the swinging doors in front of the paneled doors served as a way to provide more air circulation while providing a visual barrier from the hallway.

Recreation Room

Small safe & candy closet

Second Floor

Classrooms in the west wing.

Covered area & alteration to exterior west staircase was done in late 1960s or early 1970s when the children at St. Joseph’s started attending public school. Way for them to board the bus and stay out of the weather.

Principal’s office (admin. office now for Sandy)

Business office (has big safe in it)

East side--Private rooms for the elderly residents as well as a sitting room for them. Between 1910 and 1969 there were about 88 elderly people who lived at St. Joseph’s Home.

Third Floor

The nuns' quarters were on the 3rd floor. Sometime after the orphanage closed in 1978, they closed off the east wing of the 3rd floor and made a separate living area & kitchen. Have a recreation room with turntable & record adaptor for 45s.

Chapel choir loft entrance is on 3rd floor.

Across hall from choir loft entrance is old vestibule (now closed in as bedroom).

Also used to have chaplain's quarters, guest room, and sewing room on 3rd floor.

West end of 3rd floor—toddler room (has green carpet), across hall was nursery with cribs, bathroom in the hallway was built especially for a boy with Spina Bifida, so they would have a private place to bathe him.

Fourth Floor

West side—boys wing. Recreation room & large sleeping quarters. Community bathroom. Living quarters for supervising nun.

East side—girls wing. Rec room, sleeping quarters, community bathroom, living quarters for nun.

Attic

Access to cupola.

2 big cast-iron cisterns. They pumped water up to the cisterns from deep wells and it was held there until water was turned on in the building. Came down using gravity-flow.

General Stuff

Notice detailing on radiators throughout building.

And the transom windows.

Front doors were originally oak (probably solid paneled doors) but were removed before the mid-1970s.

The statues in the building are original.

The Grounds

Architect James K. Parker designed the grounds. Parker was originally from Oxford, England, but spent time in California and Colorado. He became very distraught at the death of his wife of 47 years and sold everything he had and traveled until he ran out of money. In 1923 he ended up completely broke in Little

Rock and knocked on the door of St. Andrew's Cathedral. They sent him to St. Joseph's to live. While Mr. Parker lived here, he wanted to give back to the orphanage. So he landscaped the grounds, built rock walls, walkways, and the entrance arch...he also terraced the grounds (this was taken out in the late 1950s or early 60s). Parker died about 1932.

Before he died, Mr. Parker wanted to build a grotto near the road, but his old age prevented him from completing the project. After his death, Sister Fintana Gilmore and the boys from the orphanage finished the grotto and dedicated it to Our Lady of Fatima since she appeared miraculously to 3 children in Portugal. An anonymous donation allowed the orphanage to pay for the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Then in 1955 the Knights of Columbus raised enough money to pay for the three statues of the children who saw Fatima—Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta. They have been damaged over the years by vandals.

720 acres has been reduced to the current 63 acres. Mr. Julius Greb, the caretaker (and an employee since 1956), still cares for 10 head of cattle at St. Joseph's.

Outbuildings:

Garage (now hay barn)

Yellow tile brick building—was a playhouse; now a greenhouse

Shop building out back

Small garden is maintained by local man & produce shared with food banks.

East playground—for girls

West playground—for boys

The east and west porches were rebuilt about 1980—need a lot of work again. About the same time (1980-ish) the back of the chapel was tuck-pointed, thus the lighter mortar on some of the brick. [The back of the building always had red brick—common practice to use the more expensive brick on the front façade and cheaper brick on the rear.]

Memorable waterslide: Sister Gertrude Grabber constructed a special waterslide for the children at the daycare. She used the natural slope of the land as well as a metal slide and an extension at the bottom of the slide. She placed a water hose at the top of the slide, and it provided hours of entertainment for the kids.

Next tour is Nov. 4 at the E. B. Moseley House at 415 Willow St. in NLR.