

**Sandwiching in History**  
**St. John's Seminary/Little Rock College**  
**(Currently St. John Catholic Center)**  
**2500 N. Tyler Street, Little Rock**  
**March 1, 2013**  
**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 the former St. John's Seminary and Little Rock College campus! I'd like to thank a few people at St. John Catholic Center for their help with the tour—

Dennis Lee

Kristy Eanes

Bo McAllister

Teresa Hayden

Lazeth (Lazette) Novak

Msgr. Thomas Sebaugh.

## **History of St. John's Seminary/Little Rock College**

The history of St. John's Seminary is closely related to the history of Little Rock College, for both institutions were located under the same roof on this campus as well as another location at 25<sup>th</sup> (or Roosevelt) and State streets, and the seminary and college had a symbiotic relationship in which professors taught at both institutions and several seminarians went on to become professors at the college.

In June 1906 Rev. John Baptist 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).

### *Little Rock College*

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 1908 Bishop Morris purchased the site formerly occupied by the Arkansas Military Academy, which was located on the block bounded by 25<sup>th</sup> (Roosevelt), 26<sup>th</sup>, Gaines, and State streets on what was then the southern edge of Little Rock. The block was empty except for a two-story, brick building at the southwest corner of 25<sup>th</sup> & Gaines, which had housed classrooms for the military academy. On September 14, 1908, Morris opened Little Rock College, a Catholic prep school and college for boys, in that building. Just twelve young men enrolled on opening day and received instruction in scholastic philosophy, Latin, English, history, mathematics, French, German, and Greek. The initial 7-member faculty consisted of Rev. D. W. O'Hern, Rev. W. H. Aretz, and five lay professors.

By the end of its first year, Little Rock College boasted a roster of 47 students. In 1910 a 2-story gymnasium, designed by Little Rock architect Charles L. Thompson, was completed in the middle of the block. As the number of students increased, it became necessary to provide a dormitory building on campus. Charles Thompson was again commissioned to design Fitzgerald Hall, which opened as a dormitory in the spring of 1912. [This building is still standing at the southeast corner of Roosevelt and State streets. The other two buildings are gone.]

### *St. John's Seminary*

In order to further increase Catholic missions, Bishop Morris needed more priests. He also believed that it was essential for a bishop to know his priests and a priest to know his parishioners, so in September 1911, he established St. John's Seminary in Fitzgerald Hall at Little Rock College. The first classes were held on September 19, 1911, with 10 seminarians who had previously been studying at different seminaries and a 4-person faculty.

### *Relocation to the Heights, 1916-1920*

As enrollment at the college and the seminary continued to increase, Bishop Morris knew it would soon be necessary to expand. So in 1915 he purchased a 40-acre tract of land "located about seven miles from the heart of Little Rock at the foot of North Tyler Street...[amidst] a complete wilderness of pine, hickory, and oak." The clearing of the grounds and the construction of buildings happened quickly, with up to 150 men working at one time. Fitzgerald Hall and Byrne Hall were completed by the fall of 1916, and both Little Rock College and St. John's Seminary relocated to Pulaski Heights. Morris Hall was completed later in 1916 due to a delay in receiving materials. The three original Gothic Revival-style buildings (Fitzgerald, Byrne, and Morris) were designed by Little Rock resident Frank M. Blaisdell, a civil engineer, architect, and landscape architect. The gymnasium (now the dining hall) was constructed soon after the main buildings, maybe ca. 1920. More on Blaisdell later...

After World War I, there was another large increase in the number of college students and seminarians. Once again, it was necessary to create more space. So in 1920 Bishop Morris moved St. John's Seminary back to the Roosevelt and State streets location, where the buildings and grounds were improved for the seminarians. Little Rock College remained in the Heights. During the 1921-1922 school year, St. John's Seminary opened with an enrollment of 32 students and 4 professors.

[Some of you may remember this from the St. Joseph's Home tour back in 2011...but during World War I, Bishop Morris temporarily relocated children from St. Joseph's Home in North Little Rock to the former Little Rock College/St. John's Seminary campus at Roosevelt and State streets. He did this because of the Home's close proximity to Camp Pike. So the St. Joseph's kids were at the Roosevelt and State streets location while the college and seminary were here in the Heights.]

### *Years Apart, 1920-1930*

From 1920 to 1930, Little Rock College and St. John's Seminary existed in separate locations. In 1925 at this location in the Heights, Little Rock College had a Department of Arts and Sciences, which offered either a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree; pre-medical, pre-engineering, and pre-pharmacy programs; and a Military Department under the control of the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) and three U.S. Army officers. During that time, about half of the student body was non-Catholic.

Also in 1925, the decision was made to separate the preparatory department (high school-aged boys) from the college, and this new prep department was called Morris Preparatory School. [This will be important later.]

Little Rock College fielded athletic teams in football and basketball called the "Eagles." In 1927 the college became co-educational. However, the increasing number of students created a demand for additional and competent faculty,

which was expensive. And when the stock market crash of 1929 put a dent in the college's endowment fund, the outlook was bleak. In the summer of 1930, Little Rock College closed but would continue to operate its prep department and "Philosophy Department" under the college charter for several years.

[This prep department, which had been called the Morris Preparatory School, moved back to the campus at Roosevelt and State streets and became known as Little Rock Catholic High School for Boys (opened September 15, 1930). Catholic High remained there for the next 30 years. In 1959 the Diocese raised money to buy a 26-acre site in "west" Little Rock, and in January 1961, Catholic High opened its new building at University and Lee (now 6300 Father Tribou).]

When Little Rock College closed in 1930, St. John's Seminary was relocated to the campus in the Heights again. And the Philosophy Department of the former Little Rock College was operated within St. John's Seminary. But to backtrack a little bit...

In 1922 St. John's Seminary opened a prep department to cater to younger seminarians. The seminary was then divided into sections—there was a minor (or prep) seminary and a major (or upper) seminary. The minor seminary was for those in high school or the first two years of college, called their "philosophy years." The major seminary was for those in the last two years of college and four years of theology, called "theologiate." The minor and major seminarians were strictly segregated.

Another important event happened in November 1922, when at the urging of Bishop Morris, the Catholic Church Extension Society (which was headquartered in Chicago) designated St. John's Seminary as the place where they would send seminarians to prepare to serve mission fields in the United States. Thus, St. John's Seminary became known as St. John's Home Missions Seminary. [In 1934 Pope Pius XI officially designated it as such.] This designation proved to be very beneficial for the seminary, as it attracted seminarians from all over the country.

*St. John's Home Missions Seminary in Pulaski Heights, 1930-1967*

And as I said earlier, St. John's moved back to the Heights in 1930. The seminary continued to grow throughout the 1930s, in part due to a complementary article in the monthly national journal of the U.S. Catholic Extension Society. A 16 mm film of the seminary made in 1938 by Father (later Monsignor) Francis A. Allen reported that 97 seminarians were then at St. John's, and that in less than 30 years, St. John's had trained 196 men for the priesthood. St. John's Seminary was Bishop Morris's proudest accomplishment, and it was often referred to as "the Heart of the Diocese."

In December 1939 Albert L. Fletcher became Bishop Morris's auxiliary bishop, which meant that he helped Morris manage the Diocese and would make a seamless transition when Bishop Morris died on October 22, 1946.

In 1950 the *Official Catholic Directory* recorded 240 men enrolled at St. John's Seminary. With help from the Catholic Extension Society, in 1950-1951 an addition designed by Thomas Harding, Jr., was built onto the back of Morris Hall, creating a much larger chapel (where we are now) and a library below it. This addition took the place of the grand marble staircase, which originally led from the second floor landing up and split into a divided staircase. Before the construction of this chapel, seminarians had to use a smaller chapel on the west end of the first floor (where *Arkansas Catholic* is now) and the gymnasium for Mass.

*Day to Day Activities for Seminarians*

I want to interject here and tell you about the typical day to day activities for seminarians during this time period. This information comes from Msgr. Thomas Sebaugh, who came to St. John's in 1945 and was ordained a priest in 1959.

5 a.m.—wake up

Wash up

Chapel—morning prayer, meditation (difficult to stay awake)

Mass

Breakfast—in the refectory (or dining hall), which was in Byrne Hall

Clean up rooms/make beds/other indoor and outdoor cleaning

About 8:30 a.m.—Class periods began (45 minutes each)

Chapel

Lunch

Afternoons—2 “work days” each week, which included outdoor manual labor on the grounds. 3 “athletic days” each week, which included football, baseball, or tennis.

Chapel—spiritual reading/prayers

6 p.m.—Dinner

Free time

Study Hall (except for free nights every now and then)

Grand Silence—no talking in the halls

Night Prayer

10 p.m.—Lights out

Every now and then, on the weekends, seminarians would get “town permissions” to go downtown or “neighborhood permissions” to go out in the neighborhood to shop or eat. It cost 6 cents to ride the streetcar from St. John’s to downtown Little Rock. Sebaugh remembered that most seminarians would go to the soda fountain at Walgreen’s at Capitol and Main in Little Rock, and then maybe go see a movie at the Capitol Theater. If staying in the neighborhood, Sebaugh’s favorite restaurant was Browning’s, and he remembered variety stores and drug stores along Kavanaugh, especially Smith’s Country Club Drug Store and Hall’s Drug at University and Kavanaugh (both had soda fountains).

He also remembered visiting Allsopp Park and taking hikes from St. John’s down through the woods to the Arkansas River (in the Riverdale area), and it was all woods.

There was a boiler room on the northwest corner of campus that provided steam heat to the three original buildings with a system of underground tunnels and pipes. In the mid-to-late 1940s, Msgr. Sebaugh crawled through the tunnels to string telephone wires so they would have communication between the buildings.

\*\*The 1940s pamphlet that I passed out to some of you came from Msgr. Sebaugh's collection and contains images of the seminary from this period.

*Back to general history...*

In 1962 Bishop Fletcher announced a \$1.5 million building campaign, which was to include construction of two new dormitories, a new gymnasium, and a convent. The first building, Fletcher Hall, was completed to the west of Morris Hall in 1965 and served as a dormitory. None of the other buildings were constructed.

The 1960s created new challenges for the seminary. Changing social attitudes in general, coupled with the documents generated by the Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II; 1962-1965), altered the Catholic Church's relationship with the modern world. In July 1967 Bishop Fletcher announced that St. John's Seminary would close its doors. Fletcher cited three reasons for the seminary's closure—low enrollment, difficulty of obtaining adequately trained faculty, and financial constraints.

After St. John's closed in 1967, the Diocese announced plans to construct a new pastoral center on the grounds of the former seminary. The building, now known as the McDonald Center, opened in January 1968. In 1968 the campus became St. John Catholic Center, which is home to the offices of the Diocese of Little Rock and its charitable and outreach programs.



## **Architecture and the Architect**

The first three buildings constructed on the campus of Little Rock College/St. John's Seminary—Fitzgerald, Byrne, and Morris halls—were designed in the Gothic Revival and Collegiate Gothic styles by Frank M. Blaisdell. Gothic Revival/Collegiate Gothic-style characteristics include lancet windows with tracery, spires, drip-molding above the windows, battlements, and even gargoyles (on Byrne Hall).

The architect, Frank M. Blaisdell, was an interesting character. He was born in Boston on September 17, 1855, and was educated in Boston and at West Point Military Academy. While serving in the Army, he was the engineer in charge of artesian wells and irrigation in arid regions of the American West. After leaving the Army, Blaisdell went into landscape architecture, designing many parks and gardens throughout the U.S., including Ravinia Park in Chicago and Riverton Park in Portland, Maine. He came to Fort Smith in 1905, where he designed and built the city's Electric Park, which was an attraction at the end of the streetcar line, as well as the Country Club of Fort Smith. About 1911 he came to Little Rock, where he designed the grounds of the Arkansas State Capitol. Other notable projects included work for the agricultural schools at Russellville (AR Tech) and Jonesboro (ASU), the administration building at Henderson-Brown College in Arkadelphia (Henderson State Univ.), and the original Mosaic Templars of America building at 9<sup>th</sup> & Broadway in Little Rock. Blaisdell was listed as an architect, civil engineer, landscape architect, and surveyor in Little Rock City Directories. It is likely that he was responsible for the entire layout of the LR College/St. John's campus, including the front gate, elliptical drive, and buildings. Blaisdell died suddenly on November 15, 1921. [His daughter, Lillian F. Blaisdell, was a well-known cartographer in Arkansas.]

## **Buildings**

*Morris Hall—1916*

Morris Hall was completed in late 1916 and was named for Bishop John Baptist Morris, founder of Little Rock College and St. John's Seminary. Above the front entrance, you will see "Morris Hall 1916" with Bishop Morris's coat of arms on the left and the seal of Little Rock College on the right. Historically, Morris Hall contained classrooms, offices, living quarters for major seminarians & priests, chapel, infirmary, and library. Morris Hall is now home to the offices of the Diocese, Little Rock Scripture Study, *Arkansas Catholic* (weekly publication), library and archives, etc.

The Morris Chapel was added in 1950-1951 at a cost of \$150,000. Notice the Roman brick on the walls. During a 1989 renovation, the wooden risers and pews which faced each other at the front of the chapel were removed. The stained glass windows depict saints associated with the missionary work of the Church. The 15 Stations of the Cross represent different scenes in the Passion of Christ, and His journey from crucifixion to resurrection. The choir loft/organ area was enclosed during the 1999-2000 renovation to make the Bishop's private chapel upstairs.

Mass is frequently held here once a week at noon on Wednesdays (led by the Bishop or a retired priest). Mass is sometimes held here on the weekends during retreats or conferences. There is ALWAYS something going on here during the weekends—they schedule weekend events out at least 2 years in advance. Funerals are sometimes held here, usually for priests who went to seminary here (fewer and fewer of those). Very rarely is a wedding held here, and only the Bishop may grant permission for a wedding.

### **Here's the plan—**

We'll visit a few rooms inside Morris Hall, and then those of you who want to, may follow me around the grounds and hear a little more about the other buildings. In Morris Hall, we will visit the Biltz Room, take a peek inside the Bishop's private chapel (Bishop Anthony B. Taylor; 7<sup>th</sup> bishop), go to the library (where Teresa Hayden will show you several items from the library and archives),

and end up in the O'Connell Lounge on the west end of the first floor. Folks, let's stay together as much as possible. Do not wander into offices, please. There are three stairwells and one elevator. Bathrooms are on every floor in the east wing.

Biltz Room—named after Father Joseph Biltz, who was an alumnus of St. John's and later became a professor here. Biltz was one of the more liberal-minded professors and was sent to Forrest City just before the seminary closed. There, he became heavily involved in race relations and the local Head Start program. Beginning in the early 1970s, Biltz worked for Catholic social services, and in 1978, he was appointed director of the Office of Justice and Peace. In November 1987 he suffered a fatal heart attack while walking on the grounds of St. John's. From this room, you can see the architectural details of the building, including some of the original leaded glass in this window. All other windows replaced in the 1999-2000 renovation.

Bishop's private chapel—St. Andrew the Apostle Chapel. Created by closing off the choir loft/organ from the chapel in 1999-2000. [Done while Andrew McDonald was bishop.]

Library—created during 1950-1951 addition of large chapel. Was much larger library before they put the archives section in the back during the 1999-2000 renovation. See items.

O'Connell Lounge—Named for Msgr. James E. O'Connell, an alumnus of St. John's, principal of Catholic High School, and the third and final rector of St. John's Seminary, serving from 1944 to 1967. This space was originally the library.

*Thank you for coming! I'll be doing a Walks through History tour next Saturday, March 9 at 11 a.m. at Marylake Monastery on Arch Street Pike if you're interested. Our next Sandwiching tour will be April 5 at the Youngblood House at 320 W. 18<sup>th</sup> in NLR.*

*For those of you who want more information, follow me.*

### *Byrne Hall—1915-1916*

Named for the first Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Little Rock, Andrew Byrne (served 1844-1862). Byrne Hall is the only building on campus that has gargoyles, which are supposed to ward off evil. Above the front entrance, you can see Bishop Byrne's coat of arms and a St. Andrew's Cross. Historically, Byrne Hall was the refectory (or dining hall) for students and staff, and it also housed the kitchen and laundry. The Benedictine Sisters cooked every meal, 7 days a week. They (5 or 6 of them) lived upstairs in Byrne and had their own chapel. The dining hall was divided—the south side was for minor seminarians (younger), and the north side was for major seminarians (older). There were also separate dining rooms for the clergy.

There used to be a seismograph in the basement of Byrne Hall (from at least 1929 to 1960; no longer there). It was monitored by St. Louis University, along with instruments in Memphis and Fayetteville, to track movement of the New Madrid Fault.

Byrne Hall is currently home to the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (rents space there), as well as Christopher Homes, which is a nonprofit organization that builds and manages apartments and homes for low-income elderly. Currently have 23 buildings and 294 units in the Diocese.

Bishop Fletcher's garden was in the northeast part of the campus, east of Morris Hall. He had a mule named Nellie.

There was an athletic field behind Byrne for the major seminarians, and a separate athletic field behind Fitzgerald for minor seminarians.

### *McDonald Center—1968*

Designed by Little Rock architect Leo J. Hiegel. Named after Bishop Andrew J. McDonald (5<sup>th</sup> bishop of LR; 1972-2000). Originally provided offices for the

Bishop, financial officer, and social services. The building has been substantially altered since its construction. Currently home to Catholic charities, including adoption services, Westside free medical clinic (open one day a week at Camp Aldersgate), immigration services, outreach programs for violence against women, alcohol and drug ministry, prison ministry, Catholic relief services (emergency management services and refugee resettlement).

### *Fitzgerald Hall—1915-1916*

Named for Bishop Edward Fitzgerald (second bishop of LR; 1867-1907). When completed, Fitzgerald Hall was the Science Building for Little Rock College. The basement housed a recreation room and showers (and storage of equipment for ROTC from about 1920-1930). The first floor was home to chemistry, biology, and physics labs and classrooms; an auditorium with a stage; and two small dorm areas. The second floor had a study hall and classrooms. The third floor was classrooms, a dorm, and a chapel (southeast corner). The seminary used the building for classrooms, a rec room, and a dormitory for the minor seminarians (west side of top floor; big open room with twin beds about 3 or 4 feet apart).

In 1989 the top two floors were converted to apartments for retired priests (St. John's Manor), and the bottom two floors are used as a conference center/classrooms. Six retired priests currently live in Fitzgerald. FYI: The first floor doors are not original—used to be windows there.

See the symbols of the academic disciplines offered at LR College on the building's façade—pre-med, pre-engineering, pharmacy, art, and music. Also see Bishop Fitzgerald's coat of arms (with the X, or St. Andrew's cross) and the date, 1915.

"St. John's Woods" was located out behind Fitzgerald. The Diocese owned more acreage to the west of campus that was undeveloped. Neighborhood folks used it as their private park. When the Diocese went to sell it, neighborhood residents were upset.

### *Gymnasium—ca. 1920*

Built to serve as a gymnasium with a couple apartments for the caretakers and/or faculty on the back of the building. Was also used for Mass when the seminarians outgrew the small chapel in Morris Hall (before the construction of current chapel). In the 1980s, it was leased to Holy Souls for their daycare. Has been converted into the dining hall and kitchen (during 1999-2000 renovation?).

### *Fletcher Hall—1965*

Built on the site of the seminary tennis courts. Designed by Leo Hiegel and completed in 1965. Originally used as a residence hall for the theology students (older) and had 6 faculty suites. Ground floor also had a chapel, music room, and lounge. Was renovated in 1991 and room arrangement altered at that time (from suite-style dorm rooms to rooms with private baths). Still serves as a residence hall for priests, youth, church retreat groups, etc. on weekends. The first floor provides small group meeting space as well.

### Extras:

World War I statue erected in 1921 to honor students and alumni who served in the war—later moved to Catholic High at Roosevelt & State streets. St. John the Baptist statue (after Bishop Morris's patron saint and namesake of seminary) was erected here in 1943 as a memorial to Thomas Lafferty, father of Rev. Clayborn Lafferty, a seminary professor.

Grotto with a shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes—located down a path beginning behind Fitzgerald Hall on the northwest corner of the campus. Difficult to access due to vegetation. Was built over a two year period by the seminarians and dedicated in May 1942.

[Remember I mentioned that a Philosophy Department of the old Little Rock College continued to operate at St. John's Seminary? Well, in 1957, the folks at

Little Rock Junior College approached Bishop Fletcher about obtaining the use of the name "Little Rock College." Fletcher agreed to let them use it, but only after he petitioned the state to grant the Diocese another charter to award degrees for which its faculty was competent (John B. Morris College; never used this charter). LR Junior College soon changed its name to Little Rock University and is now UALR.]