

Sandwiching in History
Dan F. Stowers Office Building
1516 W. Third Street, Little Rock
May 8, 2015
By Rachel Silva



Stowers Building, looking northwest



Stowers Building, looking southwest

Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Before we get started, my friend, Ashli Ahrens, will tell you about the Quapaw Quarter Association's Spring Tour of Homes this weekend.

Welcome to the "Sandwiching in History" tour of the Stowers Office Building, now home to the Ecumenical Buddhist Society of Little Rock. I'd like to thank Dan Stowers, Jr., and Eileen Oldag for allowing us to tour the building today. And I want to recognize Nikki Senn for writing the National Register nomination for this building. It is not yet listed in the National Register, but it will be presented for consideration in August.

This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you're interested.

The Dan Stowers Office Building was constructed in 1960-1961 to house the architectural firm of Stowers and Boyce. Dan Stowers, Jr., joined the firm in 1963.

After his father's death in 1971, Stowers, Jr., continued to use the building. He maintained his office here until 2013. Stowers leased the building in January 2014 to the Ecumenical Buddhist Society of Little Rock.

Deaf-Mute Addition to the City of Little Rock

The Stowers Building is located on block 6, lot 9 in the Deaf-Mute Addition to the City of Little Rock. When the Original Town of Little Rock was surveyed into lots and blocks in the early 1820s, the streets running east-west were drawn parallel to the Arkansas River as it goes through downtown Little Rock. In effect, Little Rock's "east-west" streets actually ran at a slant from the northwest to the southeast. As the city expanded beyond the boundaries of the original town plat during the late 19th century, the street grid was laid out according to the cardinal points of a compass—north, south, east and west.

Interestingly, the Deaf-Mute Addition to the City of Little Rock and the present-day State Capitol grounds to the south were located at the western edge of the original city plat. This explains why the State Capitol is not aligned to be perpendicular to Capitol Avenue. The State Capitol Building was aligned on a north-south axis, while Capitol Avenue has a slight tilt, running northwest to southeast, because it was part of the original city plat. [You may read more about this in Richard Clark and David Ware's "The Curious Case of the Catawampus Capitol," *Pulaski County Historical Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 44-45.] The proximity to the western edge of the original city also explains why this block of West Third Street in the Deaf-Mute Addition has an odd shape. It is slanted on the east side to match up with the western boundary of the original city.

The Deaf-Mute Addition was platted in 1871 and encompassed the area bound by the city's original western limit (present-day Woodlane Drive), W. Fourth Street, the railroad tracks, and Markham Street (the addition now includes a portion of the rail yard as well as the northern portion of the State Capitol grounds). The Deaf-Mute Addition was so named because the 1869 legislation which authorized the establishment of the Arkansas Deaf Mute Institute also allowed the institute's

board of directors to subdivide and sell twenty acres of the state's property to raise money for the deaf school.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most homes in the addition were occupied by railroad employees and their families. With the Iron Mountain Station (Union Station) only a couple blocks away, it was a very convenient place to live. According to the 1897-1898 Little Rock City Directory, there were a total of 16 households in the 1500 and 1600 blocks of West Third Street, and 11 of those homes were occupied by employees of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad (later Missouri Pacific; now Union Pacific). At that time, the house previously located on this site (1516 W. Third) was occupied by Albion E. Bourland, a traffic controller for the Iron Mountain Railroad.

A wooden viaduct was constructed in 1903 over the Iron Mountain Railroad tracks at Third Street. In the fall of 1903, the Little Rock Traction and Electric Railway Company sent the first streetcars into Pulaski Heights. From downtown Little Rock, streetcar lines headed west on both Markham and Fifth Street (now Capitol) and then turned onto Victory Street, where they converged and turned west on Third to head to the Heights. The streetcar line continued west on Third until it became W. Markham and then veered off on Prospect Avenue (now Kavanaugh Blvd.) at Stiff's Station. So this location on Third Street was right on the streetcar line.

The present Arkansas State Capitol Building was officially completed in 1915, one block south of Third Street, on the former grounds of the Arkansas State Penitentiary. I can only imagine that this changed the character of the neighborhood considerably. ☺ In the mid-1920s, 13 houses were located in the 1500 block of West Third, eight on the north side of the street and five on the south side. The growing popularity of the automobile in the 1920s also brought changes to Third Street. Because this was a major thoroughfare, connecting downtown Little Rock to Hillcrest and Pulaski Heights, filling stations were built amongst the houses on Third Street. By 1926, two filling stations were located just west of High Street (now MLK), operated by the Standard Oil Company and the

Gay Oil Company, respectively. However, this block of Third Street remained mostly residential until the 1960s. As the city sprawled farther to the west, many downtown residential areas deteriorated. Between 1960 and 1968, most of the houses in the 1500 block—which dated from the late 19th century—were demolished to make way for new office buildings and parking lots. The last two historic homes on the block were demolished in the late 1990s.

In 1960 Mrs. Annis (“ANN-is”) McDonnell Schaer sold lot 9, block 6 in the Deaf-Mute Addition, which contained two houses (1516 & 1514 West Third Street), to Little Rock architect Dan F. Stowers, Sr. Stowers demolished the houses and constructed the current building in 1960-1961 to house his architectural firm. At that time, he was working with Harold S. Boyce in the firm of Stowers and Boyce.

Dan F. Stowers, Sr., and Dan F. Stowers, Jr., Architects

Dan Fredrick Stowers, Sr., was born on April 28, 1914, at Benton, Arkansas, to John C. Stowers and his wife, Blanche Fisher Stowers. The Stowers family moved to Little Rock sometime in the 1920s and by 1930, they lived at 1009 Park Avenue. John Stowers worked as a painter. Dan Stowers graduated from Little Rock High School. Stowers attended college for two years and then worked as a draftsman architect. Keep in mind, this was in the 1930s during the Great Depression. At one point, Stowers moved 13 times in a single year to find work, going as far as El Dorado.

On May 23, 1936, Dan Stowers and Mary Evelyn Edds of Blytheville were married at Searcy. Dan and Evelyn Stowers were the parents of one child, Dan Fredrick Stowers, Jr., born on November 14, 1937. Dan Stowers, Sr., served in the military during World War II. He was honorably discharged in 1945 and then worked as an inspector for the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Immediately after the war, the Stowers family lived in North Little Rock’s Baring Cross neighborhood in a garage apartment at 1708 ½ Nona. In 1948 Stowers, Sr., passed his state architecture exam and became a licensed architect. The family moved to Hope, Arkansas, where Stowers partnered with Prescott architect David Weaver in the

firm of Weaver & Stowers. Stowers returned to Little Rock in 1951 but continued to work with Dave Weaver until about 1955.

In 1959 Stowers partnered with Harold S. Boyce in the architectural firm of Stowers & Boyce, which was initially located at 1001 West Second Street in Little Rock. In 1960 the building at 1516 W. Third was designed by Stowers to house the new firm. It was completed in 1961.

Dan Stowers, Sr., was well-known for his school building designs. He began a long-term relationship with the North Little Rock School District in the early 1950s, designing several schools, including Scipio A. Jones High School (black), 1952; Boone Park Elementary (white), 1952; Lakewood Elementary (white), 1954; North Heights Elementary (white), 1954; and Lincoln Elementary (black), 1960. He also designed the North Little Rock High School Music Building. Beyond his work in North Little Rock, Stowers, Sr., designed Benton High School, Benton Junior High, and Perrin and Caldwell elementary schools at Benton. He also designed school facilities at Little Rock, Sylvan Hills, Gosnell, Searcy, Conway, Rogers, Sheridan, and Henderson State College (now Henderson State University) at Arkadelphia. Some of these facilities were the result of a collaborative effort with his son, Dan F. Stowers, Jr., who came to work with his father in 1963.

Dan Stowers, Jr., was a 1956 graduate of Little Rock High School (Central). He received a bachelor's degree in architecture from Oklahoma State University and returned to Little Rock in 1963 to work for his father full-time. Stowers, Jr., had previously worked for his father during the summers while he was in college. He chose to follow in his father's footsteps because architecture was challenging and interesting, and there were many jobs available. Soon after Stowers, Jr., joined the firm, Harold Boyce left. The father-son team collaborated on many projects.

Monday, February 1, 1971, was a normal day at the Stowers firm, with father and son working side by side. Early the next morning, Stowers, Sr., suffered a heart attack and died at the age of 56. After his father's unexpected death, Stowers, Jr., continued to work in the building his dad designed until 2013.

When asked about his most unique and memorable projects, Dan Stowers, Jr., first mentioned the Burns Park Golf Shop in North Little Rock, which he designed with his father in 1964. The circular-shaped building featured a concrete scalloped roof. In addition to the building's unique design, the project was memorable because of the political maneuvering required to pay for it. It was an expensive project. North Little Rock Mayor Casey Laman knew how to pay for it, but the city council didn't necessarily agree.

Stowers also mentioned the Central Office for the NLR Housing Authority at 2201 Division Street in NLR, which he designed in 1966, after his father had designed two of the NLR Housing Authority's multi-level housing units for the elderly— Campus Towers Apartments at 700 Hickory Avenue and Heritage House Apartments at 2301 Division (1963-1964).

Referencing a more recent project, Stowers identified the Commons II Apartments, 2 and 4-bedroom apartment buildings, at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, which he designed in the early 2000s, as a memorable project. Coincidentally, I lived in those apartments during my senior year in college at Tech.

And in addition to these projects, Stowers, Jr., designed a variety of civic and educational buildings, many of which were the result of his father's relationship with city governments and school districts. Stowers, Jr., was responsible for additions and renovations to some of the buildings his father designed.

In January 2014 Dan Stowers, Jr., began leasing this building to the Ecumenical Buddhist Society of Little Rock. Although this is no longer his office, he is still drawing and working. He and his wife, Sue, live in Lonoke.

Architecture/Building Features

Mid-century modern architecture developed from the modernist movement in the early 20th century. Modern architecture broke away from the traditional

forms of construction without creating standard characteristics to define it. Modernism incorporated ideas of cleanliness, sunlight, health, and openness following World War I. Cleanliness and sunlight contributed to physical and psychological health, which became intertwined with the built environment. As it applied to architecture, openness referred to open space within the building, along with an extension of the building's interior to the outdoors through design-incorporated walls of windows. The function of a building dictated which modernist form was used. Practicality and simple lines became a theme identified in most modernist buildings, and carried over into the mid-century period.

Technology and building materials in the machine-age emerged to offer options in construction materials and methods. Modernist architects used structural steel, reinforced concrete, and glass in their transformational designs. Modernism experimented with new ideas and designs, as well as materials, in a complete break from tradition. Unprecedented design freedom and immediate cost savings from prefabricated materials encouraged these changes.

For instance, plaster was the preferred material for interior walls at that time, but it was expensive. The advent of haydite block provided a more economical alternative. The main construction material of the Stowers Office Building is haydite block. Haydite blocks consist of an aggregate masonry substance but are much lighter and have a higher fire rating than concrete blocks. And screen block, which Stowers used on the east side of this building to shield the exterior staircase, was an experimental material used to screen the sun and create privacy.

Stowers followed the idea of function over form by specifically considering the building's use as an architectural office during the design and construction process. Somewhat unassuming from Third Street, the Stowers Building was oriented to take advantage of the view to the north and provide natural light for the drafting room. Although the majority of the building's walls are solid masonry, the northern elevation is composed of a glass curtain wall. This provided the perfect amount of indirect light for the drafting room. The room was positioned

to reduce glare and supplement the artificial interior lighting to provide the standard 120 foot-candles of light required for drafting. One foot-candle is measured as one lumen--a computation of light intensity--per square foot. The north elevation also features a row of porcelain enamel panels. The light turquoise panels accent the roofline trim color. By the way, the turquoise color is original, or as close to the original as you can match it today.

- Very few changes have been made to the building, but Stowers made a few modifications to the interior in Fall 2013.
- This room (north room) was the drafting room with a kitchenette/lounge in the back corner (now the Dharma Hall). A wall separating the lounge from the drafting room was removed. The decorative screen wall behind the sink is original. A narrow hallway leading from the lounge to the lobby/reception area was used to increase the size of the restrooms.
- First room off lobby—Dan's office
- Conference room (now a small practice room for Tibetan Buddhists)—the western wall of the conference room is made of Mexican terrazzo. A poured terrazzo slab was saw-cut into blocks for the wall, giving it a unique appearance.
- Room in the front (southwest) corner of building (now the bookstore/reading room) was the bookkeeping and finance office.
- Lobby/reception area has the original terrazzo floor and the original Executone Intercom System, which was used to communicate with people throughout the building.
- Small room in lobby was the plan room. This is where contractors and subcontractors came to view plans in order to prepare figures for their bid on a given project. The architect would then choose the best bid.
- The rock garden in front of the building was redone by the Ecumenical Buddhist Society, but it now looks close to the original landscaping. The low brick walls/benches are original to the design. For many years, Stowers, Jr., had a problem with weeds growing in the garden, so he poured a concrete

slab out front and covered it every year with AstroTurf purchased at the annual War Memorial sale.

According to Eileen Oldag, the Ecumenical Buddhist Society wanted a building that represented the simplicity of their practices and had a large open space. They found a good spot! Eileen will tell you about the Society, Buddhism (and their Buddha), and the programs they offer here.

Extra:

The building next door to the east was designed by the father-son team of Stowers and Stowers in 1968 for the Mitchell-Bowie School Equipment Company.

Next tour is Friday, June 5 at St. Edward Catholic Church, 801 Sherman Street, Little Rock.