

Sandwiching In History Tour

Winchester Auto Store Building, 323 W. 8th Street, Little Rock, Arkansas

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Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Callie Williams, Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the July 2020 Sandwiching in History tour of the Winchester Auto Store building in downtown Little Rock. This Art-Moderne Style commercial building was built by Dennis and Maude Winchester in 1947 to serve as the Winchester Auto Store and is now Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects. Much of the research for this script is based on previous work done by Amber Jones in compiling the National Register nomination for the building in 2018.

Downtown Little Rock Context – Auto Culture

A permanent settlement at what would become the city of Little Rock was founded in the spring of 1820 near a point of rocks known locally as the “little rock”, with a post office established at the site by March of the same year. The growing community became the new territorial capitol in the fall of 1821 as the territorial government was moved to the area from Arkansas Post. The community of Little Rock was officially incorporated as town in 1831, and as a city in 1835. The block that now contains the Winchester Auto Store was part of the original plat of the city of Little Rock, at the corner of then Holly Street and Spring Street. This area was to the south of

the main original commercial core of the city, then focused on the riverfront. As such, the southern edges of the early city were developed first as residential neighborhoods.

By 1850 Little Rock was home to over 2000 residents and was an important economic, political, and civic hub for the region. The Arkansas River was the main transportation network for the area and Little Rock was an ideal port for a wide swath of central Arkansas. The population of the city would explode from over 3000 in 1860 to over 12,000 in 1870, and to over 38,000 by 1900.

By the 1890s, the area round the intersection of Spring Street and 8th Street was a long-established residential area, with homes of various sizes. It was also racially diverse. According to local census data, city directories, and Sanborn Maps of the area, the make-up of the neighborhoods included both rental and owner-occupied properties, and both black and white occupants throughout. This may have been more diverse as it was also close to the 9th street commercial area, that features many black owned and operated businesses and professional offices. The West 9th Street commercial area became known locally as “The Line”, in reference to the economic and social line that often separated white and black residents of the segregated south.

By the early 20th century, the West 9th Street commercial area was anchored by several large black businesses, including the Mosaic Templars of America’s large complex of buildings along Broadway Avenue as well as the Taborian Temple, built as a meeting hall and commercial investment by the Knights and Daughters of the Tabor another black fraternal insurance organization. By the 1930s, the 3rd floor of the Taborian Temple would become the home of the well-known Dreamland Ballroom, a venue that hosted performances by Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, B. B. King, Ray Charles, and many others. There were also several large African American churches throughout the surrounding area, including

Although many businesses in the area had been devastated by the depression of the 1930s, the West 9th Street commercial area was helped by a boom of activity during the war years of the 1940s. Black soldiers in the area often flocked to the area’s clubs, cafes, restaurants, and theatres for entertainment.

After the Civil War, the area continued to be primarily residential with churches and small business scattered throughout. By the late 19th century, the area around the block at West 8th Street and Spring Street continued to be a predominantly residential neighborhood, just like it had been from the earliest founding of the city of Little Rock. Also, in the 1880s, as evidenced in maps of the period, the surrounding blocks include collections of small residences noted as “negro tenements”, most likely dwellings that were rented to multiple families at a time. The

residential nature of the area also included churches, with the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church located in the block to the west, while in the block to the north east was the First Methodist Episcopal Church South, a predominately white congregation, now the location of the large First United Methodist Church complex on Center Street.

By 1900, the City of Little Rock was growing rapidly, with a population of over 38,000 people, new railroads, telephones, electricity, sewers, paved streets, streetcars, and many other civic improvements and new business. The main residential growth in the city continued in newly annexed land to the south and west, and new neighborhoods continued to be developed. By the early 1930s, the population had more than doubled and the city boasted new parks, a zoo, baseball fields, new schools, and a new passenger railroad station.

In the area surrounding the block that would eventually house the Winchester Auto Store, the early residential neighborhood had been slowly transformed into a more commercial area. The first large scale new businesses in the area were lumber yards, that often took up full city blocks. The open “ditch” that was formally known as the Town Branch, fed by the spring that gave Spring Street its name had been covered by the early 1900s, and the area’s streets had been improved. The variety of homes in the area were slowly giving way to more commercial buildings, with small rows of storefronts appearing as well as several large livery stables. By the late 1910s, most of the surrounding area was given over to lumber yards, commercial buildings, and large livery stables. A few houses of varying size still remained on scattered lots.

By 1939, the surrounding blocks had transformed to a predominantly commercial area with an emphasis on automotive related businesses. Various commercial storefronts, automobile service and storage facilities, gas stations, used car lots, and large open lots had replaced the single-family residences of the previous decades. This echoed the automotive focused transformation of the nearby Broadway Street, a part of the Bankhead Highway, that crossed over the Arkansas River across the new Broadway Bridge, completed in 1923. The Bankhead Highway, also known as Highway 1-A and then U.S. Highway 70 in Arkansas, was an early cross-country automobile highway that was built with federal funding authorized by an act of congress in 1916. The Bankhead Highway was designed to provide an automobile route between Washington, D.C., and San Diego, California. The highway designation, the opening of the Broadway Bridge, and the commercial nature of the area meant that Broadway Street in downtown Little Rock became a major automobile thoroughfare through the heart of the city, with many automobile related businesses springing up along Broadway and on surrounding streets.

In the 1930s near the intersection of 8th and Spring Streets, just one block off of Broadway Street, corner lots in the area were usually filling station and car sales lots, with various businesses in-between; including a lumberyard, a stone cutter, furniture stores, auto body repair, and a few remaining churches. In 1939, the lot that would become the Winchester Auto Store

was dedicated to a used car sales business with a small frame office standing at the center of the open air, paved lot. The adjacent lot to the south had been a large enclosed livery stable and was now an indoor car storage facility with large auto repair and sales businesses nearby. A small number of residences could still be found on isolated lots on adjacent streets.

Winchester auto building history

The Art Moderne building at the corner of 8th and Spring Streets in downtown Little Rock was started in 1946 and completed in 1947 as the new home of the Winchester Auto Store, Inc.. This company was started by Dennis “Dinnie” Edwin and Maude Messenger Winchester of Little Rock sometime in the 1930s. Maude Messenger was born in Arkansas, after her family had moved to Arkansas from Kansas sometime just before she was born. By 1900, the Messenger family was in Little Rock and by 1915, Maude was working in downtown, possibly as a secretary or a clerk. It is also possible that Maude and Dinnie Winchester met downtown while they were both working. Dinnie “Dinnie” Edwin Winchester had moved from Grant County, Arkansas, to Little Rock with his mother and father by 1910. He then worked as a salesclerk downtown. Based on surviving historical records, it appears that Dinnie Winchester had been married in 1910 to Lillian Cullins; however, she died in 1911, after just less than a year of marriage. Dinnie Winchester remarried in October of 1915 to Maude Messenger, and the two would have their only child, a daughter, Frances, in 1916.

By the end of the 1920s, both Maude and Dinnie Winchester were working for O. D. Tucker Auto Stores in Little Rock. Dinnie Winchester was soon promoted to be the manager of the Tucker Auto Store in Pine Bluff. According to family lore, the marriage between Maude and Dinnie was not a happy one after the 1920s. After 1930, it appears that Maude and Dinnie lived apart, with Maude living in Little Rock with her parents and their extended family and Dinnie living in Pine Bluff. Although they may have lived apart for decades, it did not stop them from creating and running a successful auto centered business and opening and operating several stores. It seems that they may have been better business partners than partners in marriage. By 1939, the Winchester’s owned and operated a store at 416 West 7th Street as well as a store in Pine Bluff under the name Winchester Auto Stores. Maude operated the store in Little Rock, while Dinnie managed the store in Pine Bluff. Soon, they would also have locations in North Little Rock and Camden.

After World War II, a booming economy helped fuel a demand for automobiles and all the associated auto service and parts businesses across the country. In Little Rock, this spurred the Winchester Auto Store company to commission a new, purpose-built auto parts and service store at the corner of 8th Street and Spring Street. It appears that Maude Winchester played an active role in the design of the building as well as the development of the Little Rock location’s business. The new building included an inner office space, that would have been her private

office, included food storage, a cedar lined closet, and a separate bathroom space; all separate from the locker and bathroom space that would have served the all-male sales and mechanical staff.

The design of the building echoed the common streamlined automotive design trends of the time, classical hallmarks of the popular contemporary Art Moderne style. The building's main entrance is located along the rounded corner of the building facing the intersection at 8th and Spring Streets, flanked by rounded glass block panels, emphasizing the curved corner entry space and creating a protected entry portal. Above the corner doorway, just below the roofline, the original business name was spelled out in large letters; "Winchester Auto Store". The main front façade faces 8th Street and features large expanses of glass topped by tall transom windows. These large windows provided most of the natural light for the interior of the building and allowed those walking or driving by to see the automotive wares within. Light was allowed to filter through the building through the use of large expanses of interior glass curtain walls near the machine shop and service bay at the rear of the building. The rear service bay still includes its original garage door, although it has lost its original elaborate Winchester Auto Store illuminated sign, as evidenced in an early historic photograph of the building. Overall, the building was mostly utilitarian in form and style, with only small touches of streamlined design elements seen in the more public areas of the building, especially the front façade along 8th Street. The Art Moderne style was often seen in not just buildings, but in consumer products and transportation design including trains and automobiles and even ships. Although at first glance this building may look like a standard commercial property, its Art Moderne detailing points to its place in the rich history of the rise and proliferation of the automobile in modern culture. It is also a testament to the hard work and dedication of Maude and Dinnie Winchester, who provided parts and service to a growing automotive industry in Central Arkansas.

By 1950, the area around the Winchester Auto Store was dominated by automobile related businesses, including six filling stations, seven used auto sales lots, five auto sales and service garages, and auto body shop, and both indoor and outdoor auto storage lots. Other businesses in the surrounding area included home supply related businesses, including plumbing, paint, and wallpaper stores. During the late 1950s and 1960s, the area was radically transformed by the urban renewal campaigns that would decimate the black business district of West 9th Street and introduce the canyon cut of interstate 630, that would divide the downtown area roughly in half from east to west. This resulted in dividing parts of the commercial core of Little Rock from the more residential areas to the south, by cutting off some of the through north and south streets, such as Spring Street. The urban renewal programs of the mid-20th century, although originally promoted as a push to modernize areas of "blight" in the city, it often focused on predominately black residential and commercial areas while continuing and reinforcing segregation. All that is left of the once vibrant and dense West 9th Street black commercial area is the Taborian Hall.

Many of the mid-century buildings that replaced the original residential neighborhoods are also now disappearing.

The Winchester Auto Store continued to operate at this location until 1978, although part of this time was under the name Quality Auto Parts. In 1978, the business at this location was sold, however the family retained ownership of the building. Dinnie Winchester had died in 1971, while Maude Winchester lived to the age of 93, dying in 1990. The building continued to stay under family ownership until 2016. However, by the early 2000s, the Winchester Auto Store building was languishing, being used intermittently as storage for various groups including the Arkansas Opera Theater, or simply standing vacant from the late 1970s until recently, when the building was purchased by Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects for use as their new office headquarters. They worked to renovate the building to fit their office needs while still maintaining much of the original interior material and fabric of the building including large swaths of interior metal and glass gridded windows, interior exposed hollow clay tile walls, the mechanical parts lift, and the low ceilinged upper mezzanine space. We were able to catch up with Mr. David Porter, Principle and CEO at Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects recently to find out more about their work on this interesting historic building.

Interview parts

Thank you for joining us today. More information on all of the sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places in Arkansas can be found on the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's website at arkansaspreservation.com. You can also check out videos of past tours on our YouTube Channel (Arkansas Preservation).

Our next Sandwiching in History tour will be of the Sappington Reinman House in Little Rock. This tour will take place as a virtual tour, premiering on our Facebook page on Friday, August 7th at Noon. Please check our Facebook page and our website at arkansaspreservation.com for the most up to date information on our tours and programs. We will continue to provide Virtual Tours until it is safe to return to in person tours in the future.

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