

**Sandwiching in History**  
**North Little Rock City Hall**  
**300 Main Street, NLR**  
**July 10, 2015**  
**By Rachel Silva**



### **Intro**

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of North Little Rock City Hall. I’d like to thank Diane Whitbey, NLR City Clerk; Julie Fisher, Director of Operations for the Mayor’s Office; and Sandra Taylor Smith, Director of the NLR History Commission for their help with today’s tour.

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 cornerstone of NLR City Hall was laid on July 27, 1914, and the building was officially opened and dedicated on July 5, 1915. So this past Sunday marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building’s grand opening! NLR City Hall was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 for its Neoclassical-style architecture and its association with NLR city government.

## Argenta History

The City of North Little Rock was called Argenta in its early days of settlement. Thomas Willoughby Newton, Sr., owned a large tract of farmland in this area and served as president of the Southwest & Arkansas Mining Company. Beginning in the late 1840s, Newton's mining company extracted silver and lead from the Kellogg Mine, which was located about 10 miles north of the river. In 1866 Thomas Newton's son, Colonel Robert C. Newton, named the newly platted town on the north bank of the Arkansas River "Argenta" because of the silver his father had mined at "Kellogg diggins" (argentum is the Latin word for silver).

Argenta thrived because of the railroad industry. The Memphis & Little Rock and the Little Rock & Fort Smith railroads intersected in the middle of Argenta. And the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad ran along the northern edge of Argenta and curved to the southwest, where it crossed the Arkansas River at the Baring Cross Bridge. The Iron Mountain railroad shops were on the west side of Argenta (where the UP shops are today), and the M & LR shops were on the north side of 4th Street between Olive and Locust. So, many residents of Argenta were employed by the railroad in some capacity.

Argenta was a rough town—it had no municipal government in the early days and was considered virtually lawless. In fact, the *Arkansas Gazette* often condemned Argenta, calling the town "a deserving candidate for a shower of brimstone." [AG 6/2/1877] Another *Gazette* article from November 25, 1880, insisted that Argenta "should be either incorporated or attached to Little Rock. Each train brings a number of tramps and disreputable characters to the place, who should not be tolerated in any community..." Gambling was also commonplace in Argenta, leading the *Gazette* to dub Argenta the "crap shooting center of Arkansas." [AG 9/1/1889]

Argenta residents recognized these problems, and in 1890, they filed a petition to incorporate as a city of the first class. However, this attempt was quashed by Little Rock, when it forcibly annexed Argenta, making it the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward of Little

Rock. Little Rock provided Argenta with few city services in return for its taxes, so a plot was hatched to regain Argenta's independence. Prominent north side businessman William C. Faucette worked with state legislators to pass the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge Bill in 1903, allowing municipalities, or portions thereof, within a mile of one another to consolidate, if residents in both locations approved it at the polls. At a glance, the bill was written to allow the northeast Arkansas towns of Hoxie and Walnut Ridge to consolidate, which they later did. But the bill would also allow the adjacent town of North Little Rock, which had been incorporated in 1901 just north of the viaduct in today's Mid-City neighborhood, to turn around and annex the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward in the summer of 1903. Little Rock appealed the annexation, but on February 6, 1904, the Arkansas Supreme Court upheld the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge Bill and the annexation vote. Argenta was free at last.

Residents of the new city, which was officially North Little Rock until 1906 when it was changed back to Argenta, almost unanimously elected William C. "Bill" Faucette as the first mayor. The city's eight-member council met for the first time on April 11, 1904, on the second floor of the 1895 fire station at 506 Main Street. A newly remodeled space above the fire station served as City Hall from 1904 to 1915, when the building at 300 Main was completed.

### **Construction of NLR City Hall, 1914-1915**

Bill Faucette served as mayor of Argenta from 1904 to 1909 and again from September 1910 to February 1911, when he resigned to serve in the Arkansas House of Representatives. At that time, his younger brother, James P. "Jim" Faucette, was appointed to fill the vacancy and was elected to a full term in April 1911, serving until April 1917. Bill Faucette, who was known as the founding father of Argenta, died in January 1914 at the age of 48. Completed after his death, NLR City Hall was dedicated to the memory of William C. Faucette.

In 1886 Dye Chapel—later, Dye Memorial Chapel—a Methodist church named in honor of charismatic pastor John H. Dye, was built at the northeast corner of

Main and Broadway. The City of Argenta purchased that site from the Methodist Church in 1913 for \$8,000 in order to construct a new city hall.

In February 1914 the Argenta City Council appropriated \$75,000 for the construction of City Hall and hired architect John L. Howard to draw up plans for the building. The Schmelzer & Schay Construction Company of Little Rock served as general contractor, and the company began excavation work on April 2, 1914. But workers soon experienced problems with quicksand. Then-Mayor James P. Faucette later recalled the struggle, saying, "I can remember the mules. Their hooves would sink into the quicksand and as soon as they lifted a foot, the hole would close up."

### *Cotton Bale Legend*

According to local legend, Mayor J. P. Faucette traveled to New Orleans, where he learned a common technique to stabilize foundations using cotton bales. Workers were then instructed to pour a concrete slab 14 inches thick surrounded by concrete walls of equal thickness to form a hull, which they filled with cotton bales to stabilize the foundation.

However, this is bogus. James P. Faucette never mentioned cotton bales in association with the construction of City Hall. And according to historians, the cotton bale technique was never common practice in New Orleans. More than likely, NLR Mayor Ross Lawhon started the cotton bale legend when he mentioned it in a 1949 *Arkansas Gazette* article. In a *Gazette* article published just three days later, J. P. Faucette set the record straight, saying that the quicksand problem was solved by pouring a concrete slab ten inches thick braced with one-inch fabricated steel.

### *Cornerstone*

The cornerstone for Argenta's new City Hall was laid at the southwest corner of the building on July 27, 1914, at 5:30 p.m. Mayor James P. Faucette placed a

sealed copper box into a recessed area in the cornerstone, which was then enclosed with a layer of cement. A complete inventory of the items placed in the box was signed by J. P. Faucette and recorded in the City Minute book. Its contents include an obituary of William C. Faucette; photos of the first three mayors of Argenta (W. C. Faucette, Edward A. Ramsey, and J. P. Faucette); rosters of city, county, and state officials; newspapers; membership rosters of local fraternal organizations; and coins.

### *Building's Grand Opening & Dedication*

The grand opening and dedication of Argenta's new City Administration Building took place on July 5, 1915, at 8:30 p.m. An estimated 3,000 people attended the dedication ceremony, which included speeches by Mayor J. P. Faucette and Governor George W. Hays as well as music from a small orchestra and the Argenta-Dixie Quartette. Jim Faucette declared the building indestructible, saying, "This building is constructed to stand for all time. There is nothing in its make-up that will decay or burn. It is built throughout of non-destructible, non-deteriorating material, such as reinforced concrete, brick, vitrified tile, [Florentine] marble, terra cotta, steel, and copper..." The two-story building, with full basement, was constructed and furnished at a total cost of just over \$90,000 and housed the city's administrative offices, council chambers, municipal court, police department, and 16-cell jail (located in part of the basement).

### **Architecture**

Designed in the Neoclassical style by architect John L. Howard, NLR City Hall featured rows of fluted Ionic columns on its western and southern elevations, an accentuated front entrance crowned by an arched pediment, and a rooftop balustrade. This style was based on the Classical forms of ancient Greek and Roman architecture and was often used on public buildings as a symbol of democracy. It again gained popularity after the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

Architect John Lewis Howard was born on August 17, 1867, in Saline County, Missouri, to John C. Howard and his wife, Mary Lewis Howard. Saline County, Missouri, is located in the center of the state between Columbia and Kansas City. Howard began his architectural practice in 1890 at Kansas City after serving an apprenticeship as a carpenter and construction superintendent. His designs included the Stephens Opera House at Boonville, Missouri; Columbia Transfer Warehouse Company at St. Louis; Brazil Pavilion at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair; and the fire brigade headquarters at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Howard moved to St. Louis about 1893 and lived there until 1906, when he relocated to Little Rock. From at least 1908 to 1910, Howard worked for well-known architect George R. Mann, who in 1899 had been commissioned to design the Arkansas State Capitol. Before moving to Little Rock, Mann had also lived at St. Louis, explaining their association.

NLR City Hall was modeled after a bank, possibly the 1913 Bank of Commerce, which was designed by George R. Mann and stood at the northeast corner of Third and Main streets in Little Rock until 1968, when it was demolished as part of a downtown Urban Renewal project. The designs for NLR City Hall and the Bank of Commerce were almost identical—the main difference being the use of Corinthian columns on the Bank of Commerce building. So Howard either did a lot of design work for the Bank of Commerce project when he worked for Mann, or he borrowed much of Mann's design and used it for NLR City Hall.

Howard remained in Little Rock until about 1916 and spent a few years in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before returning to Kansas City. He never married and lived mostly in hotels and boarding houses. On June 15, 1934, a fisherman found the body of John Lewis Howard in the Missouri River near Leavenworth, Kansas. He had been missing from his home in Kansas City since April 23. He was 66 years old.

## **Use of Interior Spaces**

Basement—

This building has a full basement. A large portion of the basement accommodated the city jail. A kitchen, where meals were cooked for prisoners, was also located in the basement. The city jail remained in the basement of City Hall until 1962, when a new Police & Courts Building was completed on Pershing Boulevard. In the mid-1960s, Mayor Casey Laman had the old cell blocks dismantled in sections and removed from the basement. Mayor Laman placed a four-cell section of the old jail in Burns Park, where he intended for it to serve as a “memento” and/or “play facility for children.” It is still there, located just west of Fun Land. The basement is now used for storage and mechanical systems.

#### First/Main Floor—

##### Lobby:

Various administrative offices have been located on either side of the lobby area. The city clerk and treasurer’s office has long been on the north side of the lobby. All of the money collected by the city passes through this department. This includes everything from business licenses to code enforcement fines, and people used to pay all of their utility bills here (electric, water, etc.). \*\*You’ll notice the dips in the marble floor in front of the teller windows where people stood to pay their bills. You’ll be allowed to peek into the two-story vault on the north side of the lobby in a few minutes. The iron bars were removed from the teller windows on the south side of the lobby in the 1980s, and some offices on that side were enclosed about 1992.

##### Rear portion of first floor:

The back portion of the first floor originally housed the police department. The police department had a separate entrance off Broadway. There was also a back staircase which led from the rear lobby to the municipal courtroom on the second floor. It still says “Municipal Court” on the exterior of the building above the Broadway entrance. The police department and municipal court moved out of City Hall in 1962, when the Police & Courts Building was completed on Pershing. The old Police Department area is now occupied by the City Attorney’s office.

## Second Floor—

The front portion of the second floor housed the Mayor's Office, other administrative staff, and a small conference room. The Mayor's Suite was rehabilitated in two phases—the first in 2001 and second in 2004. During the rehab, Clements & Associates Architects uncovered a stained glass skylight with the "City of Argenta" logo in the mayor's conference room. They also exposed the door to the original pressroom, which had been covered on both sides with paneling. In 1970 Mayor Casey Laman, who was frequently cross with reporters, moved the pressroom to a much smaller space on the first floor, where it remains today.

The back portion of the second floor (the current City Council Chambers) was originally divided into two separate rooms—the room on the north was the Municipal Court, and the room on the south was the Council Chambers. Shortly after the municipal court moved out of City Hall in 1962, the Council Chambers expanded into the former courtroom. The entire space was redecorated with wood paneling and a drop ceiling. The mayor's and council's desks were moved to the north wall, where they are today. There were originally four pairs of windows on the upper floor of City Hall's eastern elevation (back side of the building). These window openings were bricked in during the early 1960s renovation of the Council Chambers to help reduce traffic noise. In 2005 the Council Chambers were rehabilitated, the drop ceiling removed, and two pairs of windows reopened.

## Notable Features

- The building's exterior is made out of cast-stone and terra cotta block.
- The original one-over-one, wood windows were replaced in the early 1970s with narrow, metal-frame windows divided by solid, aggregate panels. This was done in an effort to improve energy efficiency. The windows were restored in 2001 with the help of grants from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.
- Interior of the lobby was finished with imported Florentine marble



- Floors behind the teller windows were tile. You can see the original tile in Mr. Billings' office on the south side of the lobby.
- There are a total of four skylights in the building. Three are stained glass with the "C of A" logo, and the skylight above the back staircase is plain glass.
- The "City of Argenta" logo is prominently displayed throughout the building's interior. It appears on the skylights, capitals of the lobby columns, triangular pediment above the staircase, brass wall sconces and doorknobs, and the Mayor's chair in the Council Chambers. North Little Rock was called Argenta until 1917, when the name was changed at the urging of James P. Faucette, who thought it would increase property values because of the name association with LR.
- Original brass door hardware features the Arkansas State Seal, and the door knobs say, "Argenta Administration Building, 1914."
- Bronze tablets in the lobby—one is the official building tablet with the building's date, architect, builders, and city officials. The other one is a memorial tablet to William C. Faucette and reads, "This, the Administration Building of the City of Argenta, Arkansas, is erected in memory of William C. Faucette, the first mayor and chief counselor of the city. May future generations look upon this tablet and know that to his wisdom and untiring energy their city owes its existence, and may this building stand forever, a tribute of gratitude, to perpetuate the name of him, whose first thought was for his people and for his city."
- Second floor columns are not real marble. They are scagliola ("scal-yo-la"), which is a form of plaster used to imitate marble and other precious stones.

Please feel free to look around, but we are not going in the basement. We will have a Powerpoint with old photos of Argenta and City Hall going on loop in the Council Chambers. Free bottled water is also available upstairs.

Next tour is August 7 at Oak Forest United Methodist Church, 2415 Fair Park Blvd., LR.