



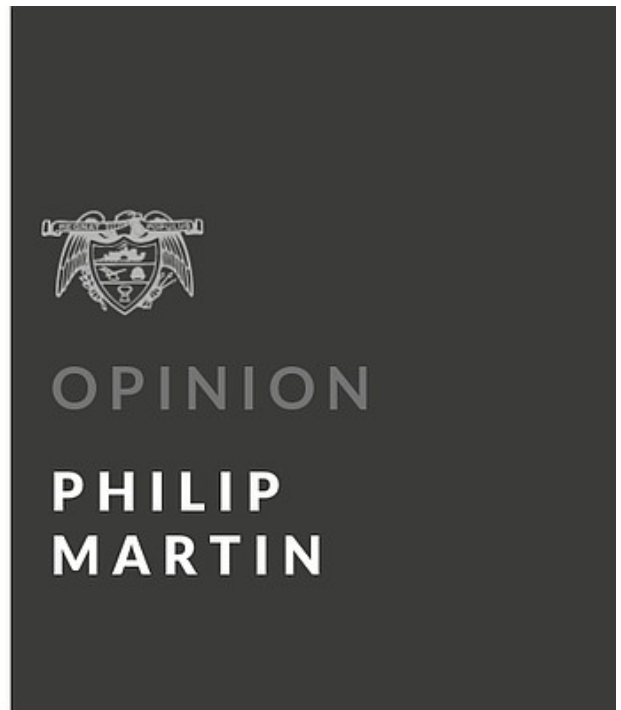
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OPINION | PHILIP MARTIN: This old house

by [Philip Martin](#) | May 17, 2022 at 4:34 a.m.

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America is a young country without ruins, constantly remaking itself. Some civilizations have been around for millennia; if you accept July 4, 1776, as the national birthdate, we aren't even 250 years old.

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Our cities, including St. Augustine, are relatively new. Our few ancient spaces--pueblos and Chumash caves--ring with mystery and dread; our prehistorical era extends into the 15th century.

We like new and shiny. So ballparks become parking lots after a few decades. So the 98-year-old St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith is coming down in a few weeks. People can be upset by that, but it costs a lot to maintain an old building, and no matter how beautiful and central to our collective identity an edifice may be, decisions are going to be made based on cost-benefit analysis.

If somebody with an extra \$20 million lying around wants to step in--maybe we can start a crowd-funding campaign--that's fine. Otherwise it's dozers and wrecking balls. That's the American way.

Old houses are pulled down to make way for three-storied mini-manses with footprints extending to within a yard of the legal property line. We are conditioned to accept change in our physical environment; most of us have probably experienced the sensation of gazing at a new drugstore or fast food stand and realizing that we can't remember what had occupied the space before.

People can do what they want with their stuff; they bought it, after all, and one of the things we cherish is the right to private property. Historical preservation is nice and all, but it's a luxury that a lot of us don't feel the need to indulge.

Hey, I live in a house that's barely three years old. I have plenty of electrical outlets.

But while there is some utility in forgetting and erasure, I'm glad there are some people who want to preserve the past. Downtown Little Rock is mostly glass, concrete and steel, but there are shady streets within walking distance lined with houses from the 19th century. In the scheme of things, the idea of "Arkansas" might not be very old at all, but we can time travel a bit.

Curran Hall, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the only antebellum home in Little Rock open daily to the public, is at 615 E. Capitol Ave., a few blocks east of the newspaper office. Built in 1842, it was designed by Gideon Shryock, who also designed Arkansas' Old State House, Kentucky's Old State House, and Old Morrison Hall at Transylvania College in Lexington, Ky.

All those buildings are still standing, and Shryock's standing has been elevated from that of a "practical builder"--as he was known in his lifetime--to "the father of Greek Revival architecture in Kentucky" as one government website dubs him. It might be a great honor for an architect to be known as both of those things.

Anyway, Shryock was born in 1802, which means that for 24 years he shared the planet with Thomas Jefferson; the United States was 26 years old when he was born. He was 40 and well-established in his career when he got the commission to design Curran House from Col. Ebenezer Walters, who is said to have built it for his young bride, Mary Starbuck.

Mary died in childbirth before the home was completed, so the colonel sold it in 1843 to David J. Baldin, who in 1849 flipped it to a young lawyer named James Moore Curran.

Curran was also inspired to procure the house for his wife, Sophia Fulton, the daughter of William Savin Fulton, the last territorial governor of Arkansas and the state's first U.S. senator. Curran died suddenly in October 1854, and Sophia married his law partner George Watkins, with whom she lived in the house until shortly after the beginning of the Civil War.

At the end of the war, the house was purchased by Confederate veteran Col. Jacob Frolich, a German immigrant who founded the anti-Republican White County Record, was reputedly the head of Searcy's Knights of the White Camellia (a Ku Klux Klan group) and, in 1868, managed to get himself indicted for the murder of a man suspected of being an informer for the Reconstruction government.

Frolich avoided arrest by running off to Canada, but returned to Arkansas after the collapse of the Reconstruction government and was acquitted on the charges. He was elected to three consecutive terms as the post-Reconstruction secretary of state in Arkansas (1879–1885).

He sold the house in 1881 after installing a few strategically located trap doors in which his family (Frolich mostly stayed in Searcy) might hide if the home was overrun by Reconstructive carpetbaggers. (Someone needs to write a book on Jacob Frolich.)

Things settled down a little after that; Frolich sold the house to Mary Eliza Bell, the daughter of William E. Woodruff, founder of the Arkansas Gazette. The last resident of the house, Averell Woodruff Reynolds Tate, Woodruff's granddaughter, lived there until 1993, when the retired schoolteacher's declining health caused her to move to a nearby apartment. (Averell Tate died in 2003 at the age of 94.)

The Tate family continued possession of the house until 1996, when the City of Little Rock and the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission stepped in to save the residence from demolition. After a six-year \$1.4 million renovation project, it opened as the city's visitor information center in May 2002. The Quapaw Quarter Association currently manages the center, which is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sundays.

But the Convention and Visitors Bureau has cut its funding of the management fee, resulting in a 60 percent reduction in the operating budget. It seems that the CVB isn't including Curran Hall in its plans. The City of Little Rock is still contributing to the house's upkeep, but the QQA says it's losing about a \$1,000 per month keeping the visitor's center open.

Wednesday is the 20th anniversary of the day Curran Hall opened as the official Little Rock Visitor Information Center. The QQA is having a reception from 5-6 p.m. there with cake, champagne, lemonade and good views of its blooming gardens, maintained by Pulaski County Master Gardeners.

If you've got some extra cash or a good idea, maybe you should stop by.

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Print Headline: This old house

Topics

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