

The Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock

By Sandra Taylor Smith



Aerial View of Park Hill, ca. 1920

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1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street, Little Rock, AR 72201
(501) 324-9880

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Park Hill History

The Park Hill Historic District is historically significant to the city of North Little Rock, Arkansas, as that city's first planned suburban development. Development of Park Hill is attributed to the inspiration of local businessman Justin Matthews, whose contributions to the city were instrumental to the growth of North Little Rock and the Greater Little Rock area. The architectural significance of the Park Hill Historic District is diverse, yet typical of two distinct periods of development --1922 to the early 1930s and the immediate post-World War II years. An eclectic mix of 1920s Craftsman Bungalows and picturesque Period Revival styles combine with the simplicity of 1940s Minimal Traditional style housing to reflect distinct periods of intense growth in the neighborhood. The process by which Park Hill was platted and developed as an unincorporated area, and then in 1946 annexed to North Little Rock is typical of many early suburban developments throughout the United States.

Aside from a few farms and orchards, the earliest development in the neighborhood known as Park Hill was in 1922, when local businessman Justin Matthews acquired a large tract of heavily wooded property atop a steep hill about a mile north of the city limits of North Little Rock.

Development of Park Hill in 1922 was concurrent with suburban growth all across the United States, particularly with the larger capital city of Little Rock, just across the Arkansas River. However, North Little Rock had come a long way in keeping up with national growth, particularly in contemporaneous development with Little Rock. Although the city of Little Rock had been settled as early as 1819 and in 1821 was sizable enough that it was chosen as the capital city of Arkansas, the north bank of the Arkansas River had remained largely unsettled.

The land on the north side was far different from Little Rock in that it was, for the most part low-lying and swampy. It was not until the first railroad line through Arkansas was constructed (the Memphis-Little Rock) that the north side of the river began to develop. The north side had a number of attempted identities such as Huntersville, DeCantillon and Quapaw, but in 1871 fifty blocks were platted and incorporated as the "Town of Argenta" and a federal post office was established. The name Argenta came from a Latin derivative of the word meaning silver since silver had been "discovered" about ten miles north of the river. Argenta was a railroad town, built around and centered on the railroad industry. As the only Central Arkansas rail terminal, Argenta had a transient nature due to the constant activity surrounding the arrival and departure of trains. Restaurants, hotels and saloons developed to accommodate the numbers of travelers. Streets were unpaved and muddy much of the time and city services were minimal. Main Street, with its saloons, was "off limits" to soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Roots Army Post.

In December 1880, the Arkansas Gazette newspaper called for the residents of the north side to "get control of the lawless conditions." Argenta applied to incorporate as a city of the First Class in 1890, but instead the government of Little Rock elected to annex the north side of the river. So in 1890, the town of Argenta Arkansas became the Eighth Ward of the City of Little Rock. By the turn of the century, residents of Little Rock's Eighth Ward were ready to reclaim their town. As a result of some clever politics, a bill was manipulated through the Arkansas Legislature in 1903 called the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge Bill. This bill allowed for any city whose boundaries are contiguous to another to annex that city. Meanwhile on the north side of the river a city had been established and incorporated called North Little Rock. Its boundaries began just north of the Eighth Ward (Argenta) and extended to what is now 22nd Street. Less than a month after passage of the Walnut Ridge-Hoxie bill, the city



North Little Rock City Hall. AHPP Photo.

of North Little Rock applied to annex Little Rock's Eighth Ward (formerly the Town of Argenta). Little Rock strongly objected to the annexation application and after many months of dispute the issue went to the Arkansas Supreme Court where it was upheld: North Little Rock could annex the Eighth Ward of Little Rock. In 1904 the City of North Little Rock annexed Argenta and once again the north side of the river was its own city.

Because of the turmoil over this dispute, little growth was seen on the north side of the Arkansas River until 1904. Businessmen and leaders of the united city in North Little Rock began to effect unprecedented growth. Prohibition eliminated the problem saloon establishments in the downtown and the city emerged as a growing industrial center in Arkansas.

Justin Matthews

One of the many people who took interest in the booming growth of North Little Rock at this time was Justin Matthews. The son of a circuit judge, Justin Matthews was born in 1876 near Monticello in Southeast Arkansas. He was trained as a pharmacist over the strong objections of his father, who wanted him to study law. In 1901 Justin Matthews married Agnes Somers, who proudly traced her lineage to George Washington and had a sizable inheritance. At the age of 24, Matthews sold the three drug stores he had acquired near Monticello and moved with his new bride to Central Arkansas.

Matthews' first venture in Central Arkansas was the organization and establishment of the Rose City Cotton Oil Mill, which was built near the eastern edge of North Little Rock in 1902. He was president of this company for many years. Matthews showed an interest in real estate and within a few years had accumulated a considerable amount of property on both sides of the Arkansas River. One

of his many purchases of land included six lots on Main Street in Argenta (North Little Rock). In 1910 Matthews built a two-story brick building with basement and steam heat that covered an entire city block. Known as the "Matthews Block," the construction of the building was the precursor for much growth in the business district on the city's Main Street. A year later, in 1914, a new city administration building was constructed. Other substantial development in the city began in earnest at this time.

In 1912 Justin Matthews turned his attention to public projects. The only thoroughfares that were surfaced in Argenta (North Little Rock) at that time were Main Street, running north and south, and Washington Avenue, running east from Main Street. Other thoroughfares in the city were so poorly drained that water stood on them for several days after each heavy rain. The unpaved streets were covered with a soil that was almost pure sand, making automobile traffic difficult as their tires dug into the loose sand.

Justin Matthews conceived a plan for street paving and drainage and in 1913 persuaded the Argenta (North Little Rock) City Council to establish two street-paving improvement districts. One of the improvement districts was to pave the streets running north and south and the other was to pave those running east and west and to install underground drainage tiles to relieve the flat sections of the city from surface water. The proposed paving would make the sandy street usable for all types of vehicular travel. Matthews is given credit for the difficult job of obtaining signatures of the majority of landowners on petitions presented to the city. In January 1913, the Argenta (North Little Rock) City Council established two improvement districts. Matthews was appointed to the Board of Commissioners, whose job was to oversee the projects. Street Paving District Nos. 15 and 16 laid 152 blocks of concrete pavement in the city in 1913. The street-paving project was especially controversial because the technology was fairly new. This endeavor has been recognized as the world's first big concrete paving job, making Argenta (North Little Rock) the leader in the concrete pavement field. Much of the credit for this project is given to Justin Matthews, who as the organizer and a commissioner on both districts inspected construction with daily visits to the work site. An editorial in the *North Little Rock Times* in 1944 extolled the significance of the street paving stating.... "it lifted us out of the mud and water. A transformation of our city immediately began to take place..." cheap shacks gave way to modern, attractive homes and our community rapidly changed from a gloomy, dusty, muddy backward town into a beautiful modern city." This 1944 *Times* editorial quoted from an article entitled "Every Community Needs a Justin Matthews" which had then recently been published in a "national construction publication."

Mayor William Faucette then asked Matthews to plan a Sewer District for the city. Formed in 1914 with Justin Matthews appointed a commissioner, the sanitary and storm water sewer system district provided a citywide system of storm and sanitary lines that emptied into an eight-foot diameter main to the Arkansas River. This drainage system was essential to the growth of a city, which was largely below the high-water level.

Justin Matthews is also given credit for negotiating a contract with Merchants Lighting Co. (later Arkansas Power and Light Co.) in 1913. It was arranged for North Little Rock to purchase current from the Merchants Co. at a low rate to operate the North Little Rock-owned electric plant. This contract was worded so the successors and assigns of the Merchants Lighting Co. would be forever bound by the contract. A few years later, when Merchants Lighting Co. sold to Arkansas Power and Light Co., they tried to cancel the contract with North Little Rock. The issue was taken to court, but

the contract was upheld and Arkansas Power and Light Co. was forced to continue delivering current to the north side at the low rate established in the 1913 contract.

Of the most outstanding contributions to the growth and development of Central Arkansas by Justin Matthews was his role in obtaining the construction of two reinforced concrete bridges across the Arkansas River. The Broadway-Main Street Bridge Commission was established in 1917 to plan and construct two new bridges across the Arkansas River. Matthews was appointed to the six-member commission and served as its secretary. Completion of the Broadway Bridge in 1923 was heralded with celebrations, fireworks, speeches and a grand parade. The Broadway Bridge replaced a bridge that had been weakened during its many years of use and was not safe for more than one vehicle at a time. The bridge project was a joint effort of Little Rock and North Little Rock alleviated the long-time problems associated with crossing the river between the two cities. Four years later, in 1927, the commission directed construction of a second concrete bridge across the river, this time to connect the two cities' Main Streets. Also in 1927 a new concrete viaduct over the railroad tracks was opened on Main Street between Ninth and Thirteenth streets.

Park Hill Development

Despite the improvements Justin Matthews had spearheaded, land was still cheap in the railroad town. Matthews began to buy land in the city, much of it from the Missouri Pacific Railroad for taxes. But as astute businessman, he recognized the potential for growth in the highlands north of the city limits and began purchasing large tracts there from landowners.

The first few blocks in the hilly regions north of the city limits was platted by Justin Matthews in 1921. Early in 1922 Matthews announced the opening of the residential subdivision he had named "Park Hill." One of Justin Matthews' grandsons stated that his grandfather's view, as a speculator, of this "high country" was that he could sell the land cheap and make a profit on the home construction. The time was ripe for development north of the city limits in 1922. That same year the War Department ruled that Camp Pike (northwest of the city) be turned over to the state for its National Guard units. And not coincidentally, the Broadway Bridge was almost completed and ready for easy automobile access to the north side of the river.

Accessibility was key to residential development on the edges of the city. Unlike the contemporaneous residential development in Little Rock's Pulaski Heights, which was reached by a streetcar line, Matthews worked toward making Park Hill accessible by automobile. As the second major suburban development in Central Arkansas, Park Hill was the first to rely solely on automobile transportation.

However, due to poor road conditions, it was still difficult to reach the Park Hill development. A favorite story about Matthews' technique for early buyers visiting Park Hill regarded how he would greet perspective buyers. At the foot of the hill, he would jump on the running board to help give their wheels some traction and go into his sales pitch on the merits of living in Park Hill all the way up the hill.

After completion of the Main Street and Broadway bridges, Justin Matthews was appointed by then Gov. John Martineau to the state's first highway commission. Paving of the Arkansas-Missouri Highway (which coincidentally became the main thoroughfare through Matthews' Park Hill development) was one of the first projects undertaken by the new commission. It assured easy automobile access to Park Hill.

An article in the *Arkansas Gazette* in April 1922 reported that”streets are being laid out and arc lights are to be installed. Yesterday workmen were digging holes for street light poles and in a few weeks Park Hill will have all the modern conveniences of a regular suburb.” Less than three months later the newspaper reported that the electric lines in Park Hill were almost complete and work had begun on the water system.

Early sales in Park Hill were geared to move the first 760 tract of land, which had been subdivided, into two-and-one-half-, five- and ten-acre tracts. Advertisements touting miniature country estates with city advantages appealed to the businessmen who worked in the city. Each tract had over 300 feet fronting a good road and was marked with white-painted, creosoted stakes at all four corners. Ten of the tracts were fenced and had a small orchard containing apple, peach, plum and cherry trees and three varieties of grapes planted on the rear of the properties. Prices were \$50 an acre, considerably cheaper than in other developing areas such as Pulaski Heights. Matthews also pointed out in early advertisements that by purchasing large tracts of land in Park Hill, owners would get a desirable place to live with the potential to sub-divide the land at a future date as its value increased.

Park Hill was advertised as a “second Pulaski Heights” but with many advantages over the Little Rock suburban development. Park Hill was nearer the business district of Little Rock and North Little Rock, had a greater elevation, and thus cooler temperatures with added health benefits. Park Hill was more level than land in Pulaski Heights, with better views. It was also pointed out that in commuting to and from work from Park Hill to downtown, one would not have to face the sun in the morning and afternoon as they did during the east/west commute from Pulaski Heights.

Some of the first advertisements for Matthews’ development lured buyers to Park Hill through an almost unheard-of offer in the 1920s. The Park Hill Land Company, in an effort to erect the first ten homes in the development offered the potential buyer the chance to pay 10 percent of the cost of the home and the developers would furnish the lot and cash to cover the remaining 90 percent of the cost and pay out the remainder on a monthly basis as they would pay rent. The buyer could select plans for homes costing from \$3,000 to \$7,000 to suit their individual tastes. This offer, made for only the first ten buyers, was an ingenious way to “jump-start” the project and assure that the type of houses intended for the development would be built.

By June 1922 six homes were under construction, seven more were sold and in the planning stage. The first houses constructed in Park Hill, as well as hundreds of subsequent others built in the 1920s were modest renditions of popular architectural styles being built all over the country. The Craftsman and the Craftsman Bungalow were the predominant house styles built in the early years of Park Hill development. Scattered throughout the area, though, are modest versions of the popular Period Revival styles such as English Revival and Spanish Colonial Revival.

In April of 1923, barely one year after the official opening of the Park Hill Addition, thirty homes had been constructed and another six were under construction. Matthews announced the opening of another 400-acre section of Park Hill. Eleven blocks in the western area of the new section comprised some of the most picturesque portions of Park Hill. These blocks, whose western edge was Ridge Road, afforded the homeowner views of downtown and the mountain ranges to the west.

Also in April 1923 the Park Hill Land Co. announced that a new “modern” bus line would be put into service within two weeks. The buses seated eighteen and ran between Park Hill and downtown Little

Rock at ten-minute intervals. And to add to the desirability of Park Hill, pipes for gas lines were laid in 1923.

Justin Matthews had formed the “Park Hill Land Company” to exclusively market and sell home sites in that development. The “Justin Matthews Company” extended Matthews’ land developments to other areas in Central Arkansas. In the mid 1920s the Justin Matthews Company was running advertisements for three separate residential suburban developments: Park Hill, Sylvan Hills and Westwood. Sylvan Hills (now included in the incorporated city of Sherwood) was a 10,000-acre development “on the highland” north of Park Hill, accessed by the paved Arkansas-Missouri Highway. Westwood was southwest of Little Rock’s city limits. “Matthews built” homes were advertised as quality construction with the best of materials and workmanship built to “endure the ravages of time.” These homes featured such luxuries as built-in ironing boards, pantries, cedar-lined closets, tile baths with pedestal lavatories and built-in medicine cabinets, wall-heated towel bars, hardwood floors and French doors. A nameplate was installed in each home which the company constructed, reading “Built By Justin Matthews, Real Estate and Investments, Builders of Homes That Endure The Ravages of Time.” In Park Hill this claim has proven to be true.

Reflective of the professionalism of its founder, the Justin Matthews Company was a highly efficient and profitable operation. The company’s close to 200 employees included an architect/builder, Frank Carmean; a brick mason, Julius Bender; a road construction engineer, Robert Massey and a horticulturist/landscape artist, Oscar Wilhelm. All of these professional members of the company resided within the Park Hill development.

Just two years after the Park Hill development opened, growth was so great that there was need for an elementary school. Justin Matthews, in his visionary way, felt the suburban development would be handicapped by lack of a school. So in early 1924 Matthews offered to build a school and give it to the North Little Rock School District if they would operate it. The school board and Matthews struck a deal and in 1924 at a cost of \$15,635, on land Matthews donated that was valued at \$5,000, Park Hill Elementary School was built. The school officially opened in February 1925. Reflective of the steady growth in the area, it was expanded in 1930, 1948 and 1953. The building is non-contributing to the historic district due to inappropriate replacement of windows in the main building in the early 1990s; nevertheless the construction of Park Hill Elementary School solidified the presence of this suburban development and it continues to be one of the strong assets of the neighborhood.

Steady Growth

The success and growth of Park Hill steadily continued. Now — with the added attraction of a school, bus service, and paved streets — more than 200 homes had been built by the middle of 1925. More than 80 percent of Matthews original Park Hill holdings had been sold by 1927 so after five years of steady home sales in Park Hill, Justin Matthews opened a restricted addition, known as “Edgemont in Park Hill.” Matthews felt the time was right in 1927 to introduce a grander scale development that would compete for the upper-middle-class and upper-income residents of Central Arkansas. Most of these affluent buyers were purchasing homes in the restricted additions of Pulaski Heights. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992, the Edgemont multiple-property listing includes eleven of the sixteen picturesque grand-scale homes built by the Matthews Company between 1927 and 1931 for affluent residents. Matthews published a brochure advertising this restricted addition in the desirable Park Hill development. Unfortunately for Matthews and the

Edgemont development, the Great Depression brought building in this area to a virtual halt. Construction did not begin in the area again until after World War II.

Although “Edgemont” is not currently included in the boundaries of the Park Hill Historic District, one of the most important components of the physical character of the entire Park Hill neighborhood was brought into the Matthews Company as a result of Edgemont’s opening. Frank Carmean, whose background was in building construction, was hired by Justin Matthews to design the large homes planned for this high-dollar area of Park Hill. Carmean was billed as the Justin Matthews Company’s “architect.” Matthews sent Carmean on a tour of several southwestern cities—Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Los Angeles—”to obtain the very latest ideas in design and construction.....” As a result, the Spanish Colonial design influence is prevalent in Park Hill. Although Carmean was brought into the company to work on houses in Edgemont, his designs are found throughout the Park Hill neighborhood. Spanish Revival style examples designed by Carmean are found at Ridge Road, Olive and Magnolia. Other examples of his designs are located on Plainview Circle. Written in the sidewalk in front of these houses are the words “Carmean Did It.” The Plainview Circle houses designed by Carmean are renditions of the English Revival style and feature prominent gables, green tile roofs and elaborate stone walls and site features.



The Justin Matthews, Jr., House in Edgemont. AHPP Photo.

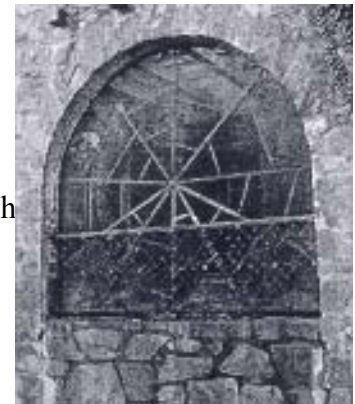
During the years of the Great Depression, there was little construction in Park Hill, but by the late 1930s several notable projects took place. Park Hill residents had needed a fire department for the obvious reasons and insurance purposes. Through a joint effort of the Park Hill Fire Department and the Works Progress Administration, “modern” fire station and water company office buildings were constructed in 1938. Listed on the National Register in 1993, the Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company Complex includes six historic structures. It is dominated by a two-story fieldstone veneered fire station building and a similarly styled one-story building constructed to house the offices of the Park Hill Water Company.

The local architectural firm of Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen designed the Fire Station and Water Company buildings. The design of both buildings was strongly influenced by the Mediterranean style as seen by the red tile roofs, arched windows and decorative cast concrete detailing. Constructed at the same time were two 100 foot by 44 foot concrete water reservoirs and two fieldstone pump houses. Located in the western region of Park Hill, this complex occupies ten lots in the middle of Block 33 of the Park Hill Addition. Now owned by the City of North Little Rock, this historic complex remains an important landmark in the Park Hill neighborhood.



Park Hill Water Company Building. Courtesy of the North Little Rock History Commission.

Also designed by Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen in the late 1930s, and just one (extra long) block from the Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company Complex is the McCord House at 3300 Magnolia. This Mediterranean styled one-story home with rear basement is located on a corner lot. The McCord House is clad in native fieldstone and features a red tile roof and casement windows. The highlight of the house is a screened porch with arched openings on each side and a fanciful wood simulated spider-web complete with wooden spiders.



McCord House detail. AHPP File Photo.

The Park Hill Theater and Community Center in the 3400 block of John F. Kennedy Blvd. (formerly the Arkansas Missouri Highway) was constructed in 1939-1940 and was another design by architects Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen. The complex, often referred to as North Little Rock's first multiple-store complex, originally housed a drug store, grocery, post office and movie theater. Edward F. Brueggeman headed this local architectural firm, which was responsible for the design of some of the most notable buildings in Park Hill. They were well known for their work in the Central Arkansas area during the 1930s. Other examples of the firm's designs include the Monterey style Pruniski House in another section of Park Hill, the Knoop House in Pulaski Heights' Hillcrest section. The firm was best known for its designs for Malco theater buildings nationwide in the 1930s. In the early 1940s, the Brueggeman firm designed a large portion of the new construction at Camp Joseph T. Robinson, north of North Little Rock's city limits. One member of the Brueggeman firm, Guy W. Swaim, was a resident of Park Hill. Swaim built the Minimal Traditional style house at 115 Cherry Hill in 1941 and it is still occupied by his widow.

World War II-era Development

Events in Europe in the summer of 1939 and the resulting preparation for impending war had a direct and immediate financial effect on the city of North Little Rock. President Franklin Roosevelt, in the fall of 1939, increased the size of the then small Regular Army and all combat units of the stateside army were ordered into the field for intensive training. Northwest of North Little Rock, Camp Pike - - renamed Camp Joseph T. Robinson in honor of Arkansas's United States senator after his death in 1937 -- was selected to house a training division. In early 1940 Army engineer and quartermaster units started arriving at the camp to formulate plans to build the camp to house upwards of 50,000 troops.

Knowing that housing would soon become one of its most pressing needs, North Little Rock officials formed a housing authority to operate under the guidance of the United States Housing Authority. Demand for housing near Camp Robinson became so great that in 1940 North Little Rock Mayor O.W. Neely warned property owners in the city against charging exorbitant rents.

The impact of the war effort brought a large increase in population. The need for housing in Little Rock and North Little Rock, specifically near Camp Robinson, was tremendous. Despite wartime shortages of construction materials, over 100 homes were constructed in Park Hill between 1939 and 1941 to meet the demand for housing.

The close of the war saw veterans returning to North Little Rock, to find a housing shortage that continued through the end of the decade. With the end of war efforts, the federally mandated limitations on availability of construction materials were lifted. Post World War II entrepreneurs with high aspirations and a newly discovered belief in mass production emerged all across the country. The returning GIs' needs for housing and government-backed loans for these veterans started a nationwide building boom. The demand was for affordable housing that could be cheaply and quickly produced.

Prefabrication of housing in the nineteenth century had been defined by the mass production of interchangeable building parts. The Great Depression intensified American resolve to mass-produce houses, much like Henry Ford manufactured automobiles. America had, in 1946, a new mind set toward mass-produced items, having seen the benefits and efficiency of the manufacturing process first hand in the World War II effort.

Bralei Homes

Responding to the immense need for housing that could be quickly produced, a newly formed business located in North Little Rock announced its opening in early 1946. This company, Bralei Homes, Inc., advertised small, affordable houses that could be built in only a few weeks. The full-page advertisement in the *North Little Rock Times* on February 15, 1946, announcing formation of the company showed the first four house plans offered by Bralei Homes Inc. These homes ranged in price from \$3,988 to \$5,137. Sales of Bralei homes were targeted to returning veterans and FHA financial assistance was practically guaranteed. The ad stated:

“Here is the announcement that will thrill the heart of every home loving man or woman in Greater Little Rock. Right on schedule come the first BRALEI Homes from the drafting

boards. Procurement of materials for these homes has started. Bralei Homes will be Precision

Built to exacting specifications. Here are several designs from which to select. Several more will be offered soon. Bralei Homes will be built by factory production methods in the big BRALEI factory and removed to your own building lot for erection, where component parts will be assembled and lost motion and wasteful methods eliminated.....BRALEI Homes are conventional in appearance, permanently built, with no indication of the production methods used.”

The name “Bralei” was a combination of the president and vice-president of the company’s names- Buford Bracy and Paul M. Leird. Secretary-Treasurer of the company was C.V. “Cotton” Barnes.

The Bracy family was well established in home construction business. In the late 1920s, Bracy Real Estate and Building Company erected many of the houses in the Pulaski Heights neighborhoods, particularly Hillcrest. Bracy Real Estate’s “designer” was Buford Bracy, son of the company’s founder and president, Eugene D. Bracy. Buford Bracy was well known in the Greater Little Rock area for his design of picturesque brick and stone veneered homes in Little Rock’s first suburban development. Paul Leird was owner of Leird Lumber Company in Little Rock. The combination of established design talents, experience in real estate development and the direct availability of building materials was of great value to the success of the Bralei Company.

Despite the fact that Buford Bracy was well known for his home designs, he did not design the Bralei houses. Instead, Bralei Company utilized some of the most talented architects in Arkansas to design the Bralei houses. The stature of the architects who designed the Bralei homes were, no doubt, a great boost to the credibility of the company. Architects of such stature as Frank Ginocchio and Ed Cromwell (successor of the firm founded by architect Charles L. Thompson), H. Ray Burks & Bruce Anderson, Yandell Johnson, and the familiar-to-Park-Hill firm of Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen. These architects were among the most prominent in the state and had among their ranks designed monumental structures such as courthouses, business buildings and governmental buildings. The partnership of Frank Ginocchio and Edwin Cromwell was responsible for the design of the Arkansas Governor’s Mansion in 1949, only three years after the Bralei Company opened.

According to the *North Little Rock Times* in April 1946, just three months after the company announced their opening, 84 Bralei Homes had been constructed in Park Hill. Construction demand was huge in Park Hill and Justin Matthews provided plenty of new building sites by continuing to open more sections of his land holdings. Through the early 1950s many more Bralei Homes were constructed, comprising the majority of homes built in Park Hill in the immediate post war years.

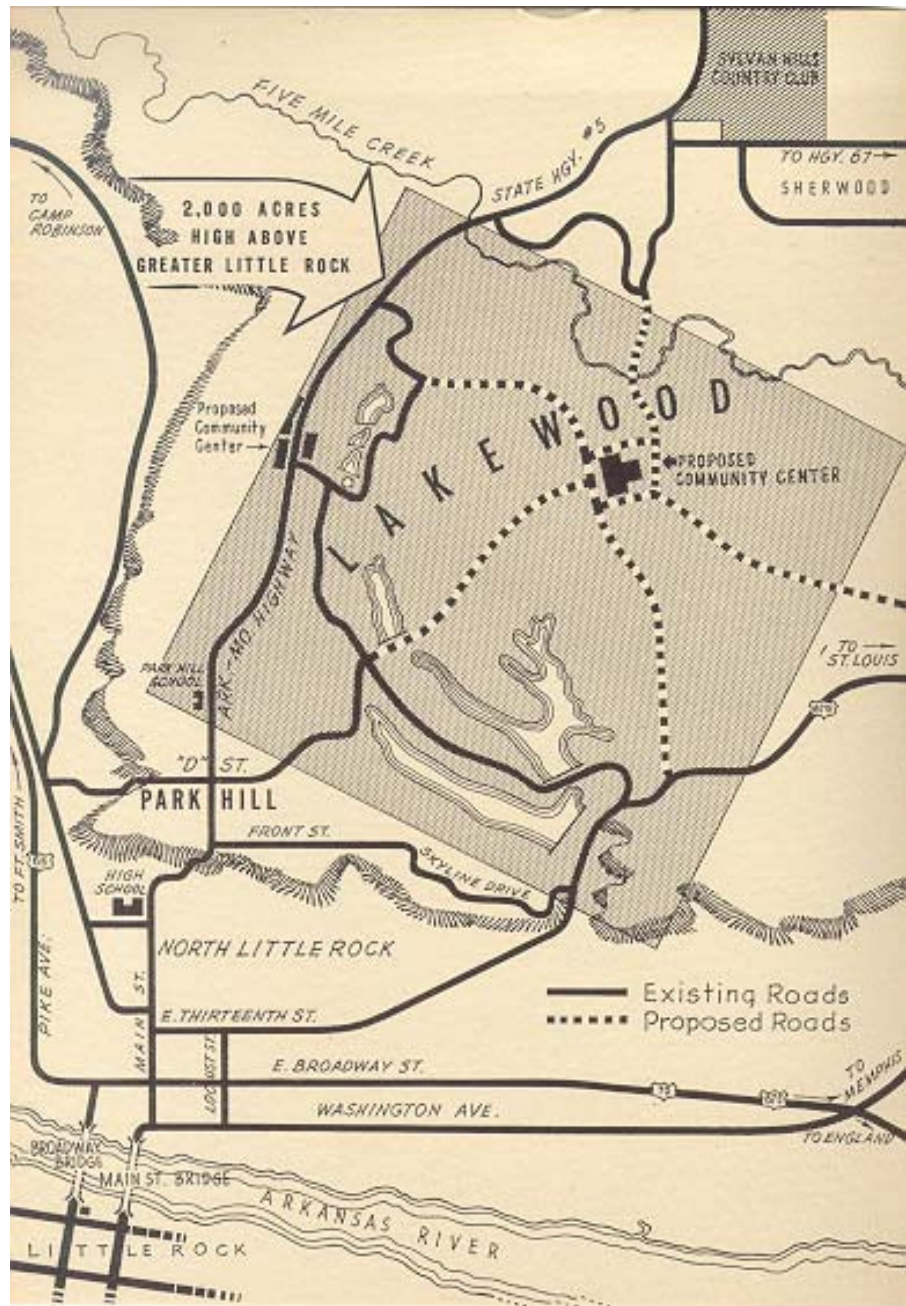
Despite the fact that at the close of World War II Park Hill was a sizable development, it was not a part of the city of North Little Rock. The city had wanted to annex Park Hill for a number of years, but residents, led by Justin Matthews, had rejected the attempts. One of the reasons for Park Hill’s rapid growth had been that it had all of the city services -- school, paved streets, water and sewers -- but no city taxes. Unlike other unincorporated areas outside of North Little Rock, such as Levy, Park Hill never formed any type of community government.

The North Little Rock City Council unanimously approved an ordinance providing for the annexation of the Park Hill area in February 1946. A general election was held in April 1946 and citizens

of North Little Rock overwhelmingly approved the annexation. It was estimated that about 5,000 residents were added to the city with the annexation of Park Hill.

Park Hill continued to grow through the 1950s as it expanded further north. Justin Matthews' newest residential development in the 1950s was the Lakewood area of North Little Rock. A part of his original plan for residential development, Matthews had in 1931 formed the "Lakewood Development Co." to develop this area in the hills northeast of Park Hill. As part of the Lakewood project, eleven dams were constructed, creating recreational lakes. Included in the project was construction of Pugh's Mill (commonly known as the "Old Mill" and listed on the National Register in the Arkansas Sculptures of Dionicio Rodriguez multiple-property nomination on December 4, 1986). It was built as a tourist attraction to lure potential buyers into the Lakewood area. However, the construction of homes in Lakewood did not begin in earnest until after World War II.

Detail from promotional brochure for Lakewood. AHPP File Photo.



The Park Hill neighborhood did benefit from the proposed Lakewood development in the 1930s when Justin Matthews brought in Mexican-American sculptor Dionicio Rodriguez. He designed and created the Old Mill sculptures using his characteristic “rustico” style of work that was constructed of reinforced concrete. In addition to his artistic legacy at the Old Mill, Rodriguez also created sculptures for Crestview Park, at the foot of Park Hill. A rusticated shelter and a fallen tree bridge with bent tree limb railings and a plank floor are located in this small park which was immediately adjacent to the road leading to the top of Park Hill.



Crestview Park sculpture. AHPP Photo.

Though the majority of houses in the historic portions of Park Hill had been built by the mid-1950s, there continued to be sporadic new construction on the few unsold lots, or on large tracts that were divided.

The Park Hill area of North Little Rock continued to grow as the city grew northward. The 1960s brought about considerable commercial development on John F. Kennedy Boulevard, which historically was mixed residential and commercial usage. In the 1960s a number of historic homes were demolished along this thoroughfare and replaced with “fast food” businesses. In fact, one of the first McDonald’s in Arkansas was built at 3217 J.F.K. Blvd. Residents from all around Arkansas flocked to eat at the new restaurant. During the 1960s and 1970s other changes to Park Hill’s commercial thoroughfare were made, with construction of small-scale doctor’s office buildings and service stations. A number of the historic residential prop-

erties on J.F.K. were converted to commercial use and remain today.

Despite the fact that time has not stood still in Park Hill, the neighborhood’s visual character overwhelmingly derives from two distinct periods of intense growth: the early development period of the 1920s, and the immediate post-World War II simplicity of affordable housing for an exploding housing market. Containing 563 houses and buildings, of which 481 were constructed during the years between 1922 and 1950, the composition of the Park Hill Historic District parallels that of the country and popular domestic architecture in these periods. The product of one of the most ingenious businessmen in the Central Arkansas area, Park Hill is a legacy to developer Justin Matthews. Mr. Matthews, in the process of creating his suburban development, was responsible for some of the most important city improvements in North Little Rock. Park Hill remains a viable and much desired neighborhood, comprised of a wide cross-section of residents. Because of this, Park Hill has remained a stable area since its creation in 1922, with little demolition or construction of incompatible homes, other than along the neighborhoods’ commercial thoroughfare J.F.K. Boulevard.

The Park Hill Historic District

Boundaries

Boundary determinations of the Park Hill Historic District were based on a comprehensive two-year survey of every structure in a defined portion of the neighborhood sponsored by the City of North Little Rock and funded through matching Certified Local Government grants. Although the surveyed area reflects the majority of the historic Park Hill neighborhood, sections that were largely developed after 1950 were excluded from the survey and consequent historic district. The surveyed area is roughly bounded on the south by John F. Kennedy Boulevard and East “A” Street, on the north by West “H” Street, and East “D” Street, Ridge Road on the west and Plainview Circle on the east.

Included within the Park Hill Historic District are 568 houses, buildings, and structures; nine of the buildings are in the Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company Complex, two are concrete park structures designed by sculptor Dionicio Rodriguez, nineteen are commercial buildings, one is a public school, one is a public clubhouse and the remaining 536 properties are residential. Boundaries of the district directly correspond to the surveyed area and although the ratio of non-contributing to contributing structures is 49 percent contributing to 51 percent non-contributing, it has been determined that these district boundaries contain the most significant portions of Park Hill first platted and developed as North Little Rock’s first suburban neighborhood. Of the 276 buildings considered non-contributing, an overwhelming majority are frame historic houses constructed in the late 1930s and 1940s in the Minimal Tradition style of architecture. A large portion of these have been covered with artificial siding.

Overview

The area known as Park Hill is located on a steep hill north of what were the city limits of North Little Rock until 1946. Park Hill is largely residential in composition and is bisected by John F. Kennedy Boulevard (formerly the Arkansas-Missouri Highway), the historic commercial corridor through the area. Though the first sections of Park Hill were platted in 1921, other sections were opened piecemeal through the 1950s and the entire Park Hill area now encompasses more than 1600 acres.

In 1921, businessman Justin Matthews platted the first section of Park Hill and began offering lots for sale in early 1922. Growth in Park Hill was steady through the 1920s, then interrupted by the Great Depression in the 1930s. Due to Park Hill’s proximity to Camp Joseph T. Robinson and the demand for housing for soldiers and their families during the years of World War II, there was a considerable amount of construction in Park Hill in the early 1940s. The nationwide building boom in the immediate post war years also greatly affected Park Hill.

Of the 568 properties included in the Park Hill Historic District, the overwhelming majority are residential. Construction of housing in Park Hill falls into two distinct periods: 1920s and 1940s. There are nineteen buildings constructed for commercial use, a concrete pavilion and footbridge in a neighborhood park, one public school, one public clubhouse and a historic fire station and water company complex.

Architectural History of Park Hill

The Park Hill Historic District is the earliest suburban development in the city of North Little Rock. The neighborhood is located on a hill overlooking the city's downtown, the Arkansas River, and downtown Little Rock. The Park Hill neighborhood is bisected by John F. Kennedy Boulevard (formerly the Arkansas-Missouri Highway), the commercial corridor through the area. The first lots in Park Hill were platted in 1921 and sales of property began in early 1922. Park Hill's developer, Justin Matthews, headed the Park Hill Land Company, which marketed, sold and developed the area. The Park Hill Land Company had a sizable staff, which included an architect/designer, brick mason, horticulturist and landscape artist, and a superintendent of road construction, to name a few in addition to construction workers. The Park Hill Land Company also built and operated a complete wood working plant.

Within months of announcing the opening of Park Hill, there were some thirty houses constructed. These first few houses were followed by hundreds of others within a few years. Matthews was a cautious businessman and Park Hill was platted bit by bit as he waited for several houses to be built in one section before opening another section for development.

Streets in the Park Hill Historic District were generally laid out in a grid pattern. Derivation from the typical grid is found along the crests on the hill.

Growth and development of Park Hill were firmly established in the 1920s, interrupted by the Great Depression and begun again in 1940. Of the 481 structures constructed in Park Hill from 1922 to 1950, the number is almost equally divided in the two distinct periods of growth. During the 1920s and 1930s, the period when the first development began, there were 245 (43 percent of the district) houses and buildings constructed. Of these, 160 were constructed in the 1920s and 85 during the 1930s. The second period of intense growth in Park Hill began in 1940 and ended in 1950. In this decade, 236 (42 percent of the district) houses were built.

Construction in the 1920s

The opening of Park Hill in early 1922 quickly proved to be successful. In the first eight years of development, 159 houses and a school were constructed. Park Hill was designed to be an affordable neighborhood, and under the tight control of its developer, Justin Matthews, its early composition grew to be modest versions of architectural styles popular throughout the country in the 1920s- Craftsman, Craftsman Bungalow and the Period Revivals.

Matthews' Park Hill Land Company constructed the majority of houses built in Park Hill during the 1920s. The company's architect/designer, Frank Carmean did not begin work with Matthews until 1927. The houses built in Park Hill prior to Carmean's association are largely of the Craftsman and Craftsman Bungalow style. Perhaps because the Park Hill Land Company had among its ranks a brick mason, the majority of these Craftsman influenced houses are brick veneered and their appearance remains much the same as originally. Early houses constructed in Park Hill were bricked in alternating colors, red and buff brick. There are sections where a glimpse of this deliberate brick pattern is still visible such as seen in the west sides of the 3200-3500 blocks of North Olive Street. Since a number of the brick houses have been painted, particularly the buff colored ones, the sense of a brick color alternation is somewhat diffused.

The influence of the Craftsman style in Park Hill is most discernible with a total of sixteen Craftsman style houses and sixty-one Craftsman Bungalows. These seventy-seven Craftsman influenced houses display the style's key features such as a low pitched, gabled roof accentuated by a wide unenclosed eave overhang with exposed roof rafters, and tapered square columns on pedestal porch supports. There are no grand style or exaggerated versions of the Craftsman style in Park Hill, but the modest Craftsman style common to the neighborhood is exemplified in the houses found at 225 E. "A" Street, 282 Plainview Circle, 3307 Poplar and 3212 Magnolia. A two-story brick version of Craftsman is commonly seen in Park Hill. With a front facing gable or clipped gable roof, this house form is seen in red brick at 143 Crestview and 3317 Olive. Buff-colored brick covers the same two-story Craftsman house plan and is seen at 276 Plainview Circle and 419 West "D."

225 East "A" Street, Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock. AHPP Photo.



The Craftsman Bungalow is the type of house most often built in Park Hill in the 1920s. The American Craftsman Bungalow became the "cottage" of the early decades of the twentieth century. A wide diversity of stylistic influences show links with many popular American architectural styles. The American Bungalow adapted itself to widely divergent environmental and climatic conditions, made use of numerous kinds of local building materials and ranged in size from rambling weekend retreats to small, low-income residences. During the rapid growth of Park Hill in the 1920s, sixty-one small-scale Craftsman Bungalows were constructed. Although there are several different variations of 1920s Bungalows in Park Hill, a common theme in their design links them. The Bungalow is set low to the ground; it nestles into and becomes part of its environment. The house at 315 West "F" is an example of the compatibility of the Bungalow with its setting.

Inspired by the California architects Greene and Greene, Craftsman-type bungalow designs in the early part of the twentieth century were popularized by extensive publicity. The affordability of the Craftsman Bungalow led it to become the small house design of choice throughout the country. The Bungalows in Park Hill employ the same Craftsman characteristics such as the use of rustic materials on the exterior and low pitched roof with wide eaves and extended rafter tails as those being built all across the country in the 1920s.

Examples of the Craftsman Bungalow form common to Park Hill include those found at 119 West

“G,” 3318 Cypress and 3317 Poplar. Employing a variety of Craftsman details such as multiple roof planes and horizontal bands of windows, these houses feature clipped gable and gable roofs and combinations of rustic materials such as natural stone and rough-hewn timbers in their detailing. The houses located at 3401 and 3405 Olive are examples of the most commonly seen Bungalow form in Park Hill. These houses are brick veneered with front facing gable roofs and porches with cross gable roofs and utilize stucco on the walls of the prominent gable ends.



3318 Cypress Street, Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock. AHPP Photo.

Another form of the cross-gabled roof type Bungalows is most often associated with “California Bungalows.” These houses all incorporate multiple roof planes, Oriental-like flared rooflines, and prominent triangular knee braces supporting wide eaves with extended rafter tails. A variation of the “California Bungalow” features a single second-story room affording a panoramic view of the sky, hence the name “Airplane Bungalow.” The houses at 3216 Poplar and 3614 Ridge Road display this characteristic hipped roof second story room with wide eaves and accentuated exposed rafter ends along with the typical porte cochere and short battered columns on brick piers.

3216 Poplar Street, Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock. AHPP Photo.



Virtually unaltered since its construction in 1922, the John A. Rossi House at 201 West “D” Street is a textbook example of the Craftsman style bungalow, incorporating elements such as a trellised roof over side porch, multiple roof planes and extended rafter tails under wide eaves. Situated on a highly visible corner lot, the Rossi House was the second to be constructed in Park Hill.

Period Revival Styles

Nationwide in the 1920s an eclectic flavor of design emerged. Building design began incorporating many of the “romantic” styles of the past. English and Spanish influences were some of the most common historic styles incorporated into these picturesque houses.

The largest group of “Period Revival” houses in the Park Hill Historic District falls into the English Revival category. In the 1920s more than fifty houses of English Revival style were constructed in Park Hill. As seen in the neighborhood’s other styles, English Revival style houses in Park Hill were small versions best expressed as the “English Cottage.” One-story brick homes with steeply pitched gable roofs and prominent front facing gable porches, tapered chimneys on front facades and a mix of materials such as stone and bricks are commonly seen in the Park Hill neighborhood.



135 Crestview Street, Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock. AHPP Photo.

An outstanding interpretation of the English Revival cottage is located at 135 Crestview. This house features rough-face rubble stone on exterior walls and a gablet roof with a wrapped edge, which was intended to give the impression of a thatched roof. Exemplary small versions of the English Revival cottage more typical to Park Hill are found at 127 West “F” and 236 West “B.” These homes utilized the steep front facing gable and round arched openings as their primary design element. More elaborate versions of the English Revival style are seen in three houses located on Plainview Circle. Houses at 249 and 255 Plainview Circle are denoted by their clipped gable roofs covered with green tiles, fieldstone clad exterior walls and the use of round-arched openings. The one-story with rear basement brick and stone house at 211 Plainview Circle is a more horizontally emphasized English Revival design, which features steep gable and clipped gable roofs on its facade. All three of the English Revival “period” houses on Plainview Circle feature elaborate fieldstone walls and site features in their sloping rear yards. At least two of these houses are known to have been designed by

Justin Matthews' architect, Frank Carmean. Discretely written on the concrete sidewalk in front of 211 Plainview and 249 Plainview are the words "Carmean Did It."

There are eight "Spanish Revival" style houses in the Park Hill Historic District. Stucco walls, terraces and patios, flat roofs with raised tile ridged parapets, arcaded wing walls, and decorative use of ceramic tiles exemplify the 1920s period adaptation of the historic Spanish style. Examples of Spanish Revival influenced designs in Park Hill houses include 505 West "F" Street, 501 West "F," 237 East "A" and 3617 Ridge Road. After architect/designer Frank Carmean was brought into the Justin Matthews Co., this style house was offered to the buyer. However, most of the grand-scale Spanish Revival style homes in Park Hill were constructed in the more affluent Edgemont section of the neighborhood.



515 West "F" Street, Park Hill Historic District, North Little Rock. AHPP Photo.

Construction in the 1930s

Construction in Park Hill during the 1930s mirrored the nationwide economic downturn. Only eighty-two houses were constructed in the Park Hill development in the 1930s. The styles of these houses included scaled down versions of the same Craftsman, Craftsman Bungalow and Period Revival styles, which had been built there in the 1920s. The Colonial Revival style was introduced to Park Hill for the first time in the late 1930s. The six Colonial Revival style houses built in Park Hill in the 1930s are located in the western section of the neighborhood. The J. Wayne Pickens House at 3723 Ridge Road was constructed in the mid-1930s from a house plan in a national magazine. This two-story Colonial Revival style frame house with fieldstone foundation and detailing remains unaltered with the exception of a gable roof carport which was added in the 1950s.

Constructed in 1938, the house at 500 W. "F" Street is a version of the gambrel roof subtype of the Colonial Revival style. This house features a symmetrical facade with first floor bay windows and two dormers extending from the side-facing gambrel roof. The houses at 3127 and 3131 Magnolia were constructed in 1939. They are one-story frame houses with a rear basement, and feature symmetrical facades with evenly spaced dormers and windows. A stylish Colonial Revival entry on the house at 3127 Magnolia features a curved fanlight above the door and leaded glass sidelights. A larger, two-story version of 1930s Colonial Revival design is located at 3309 Poplar.

*J. Wayne Pickens
House, Park Hill
Historic District,
North Little Rock.
AHPP Photo.*



The Solon Humphries House at 3100 Magnolia is an example of the “Garrison Colonial,” a style popular in the United States from about 1935 to 1955. This subtype of the Colonial Revival style features a second-story overhang on the facade of the house. Although the Humphries House has been covered in synthetic siding, the width matches the original wood boards.

Mediterranean style influence is seen in the design of the Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company Building built in 1938 at 3417-3421 Magnolia. The architectural firm of Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen was employed to design these facilities. Included in the complex, which was listed on the National Register in 1993, are nine structures, six of which are historic and contribute to the district. The complex covers a large portion of the block on the west side of Park Hill and in addition to the fire station and water company office. There are two flat-roofed field stone pump houses and two 100 foot by 44 foot concrete water reservoirs. The project was constructed with the assistance of WPA labor and includes numerous fieldstone sidewalks, retaining walls, benches and other site features.

The McCord House at 3201 Magnolia was also designed by the Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen firm and built in the late 1930s. The house is similar in design to the Fire Station and Water Company buildings with fieldstone wall material, red-tile roof and cast-concrete detailing. Arched openings on a side screened porches on the house feature whimsical simulated spider webs of wood with wooden spiders. Also, constructed in Park Hill during the 1930s were a concrete pavilion and footbridge in Crestview Park on the southern edge of the neighborhood and a Boy Scout clubhouse in a triangular-shaped block on the northeastern edge of Park Hill.

Construction in the 1940s

In the late 1930s an architectural form emerged which was utilitarian and economy oriented. As a reflection of the economic crises of the 1930s, designs of this small home form attempted to reflect the various revival styles popular in the 1920s but lacked decorative detail. Roof pitches are gener-

ally low and eave rakes close. Houses of this type were built all over the country immediately preceding and following World War II. But unlike most American cities during the years of World War II, North Little Rock experienced a building boom due to demand for affordable housing near Camp Joseph T. Robinson. As a direct result of the dramatic increase in the need for housing for military families, between 1940 and 1943 there were 137 houses built in the nearby Park Hill neighborhood. The majority of these houses are of Minimal Traditional style. Typical examples of this type of house include those at 3316 Olive, 3220 Poplar and 3317 N. Pine.

With the end of World War II in 1945 and the return of veterans to their hometown with government assistance available for home purchase, construction companies sprang up all over the country to take advantage of the great demand for housing. One such company called Bralei Homes, Inc. began operation in North Little Rock in 1946, offering affordable homes that could be built within a matter of weeks. Bralei Homes were prefabricated in their local factory, then moved to the building site where assembly was completed. The Bralei Company advertised that their homes were “conventional in appearance, permanently built, with no indication of the production line methods used.” On the building site reinforced concrete foundations were set on concrete footings. The water lines laid at Bralei houses were mass-produced by a local plumbing company. Bralei boasted that all foundation lumber including sills, joists and sub-floors were wolmanized lumber, guaranteed to be rot and termite resistant. Lumber for exterior siding was guaranteed to be kiln dried to proper moisture content.

Of particular significance is the fact that Bralei Homes were designed by local architects of considerable experience and prominence. The firms of Frank Ginocchio & Edwin Cromwell, H. Ray Burks & Bruce Anderson, Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen, and Yandell Johnson designed the Bralei houses.

Located in the boundaries of the Park Hill Historic District are thirty-nine houses that have been identified as Bralei constructed. All but four of these houses have been covered with siding, some of which appears to have been among the earliest applications of artificial siding in Park Hill. Thirty-one of these Bralei homes, although artificially sided retain their original appearance with similar width of siding. Since the houses had little decorative detail, those which have been sided appear much the same as their original appearance. Despite the fact that Bralei Homes Inc. boasted of their superior product, it was discovered early on that the exterior of the houses would not hold paint. Although the majority of the Bralei houses within the Park Hill Historic District are covered in artificial siding, their collective significance is important to the architectural history of the Greater Little Rock area.

Multi-Family

The Patricia Apartments at 3126 John F. Kennedy Blvd. is the only historic apartment building located within the boundaries of the Park Hill Historic District. The two-story brick building with a hipped roof was designed by the Brueggeman, Swaim and Allen firm and constructed in 1941. Three other two-story brick apartment buildings were constructed on J.F.K. Boulevard in the early 1950s, but are not included in the historic district. Several duplexes are located in the district (some by Bralei Homes, Inc.) and were constructed in the late 1940s. Other sections of Park Hill, north of the historic district were opened in the 1950s and contain large numbers of duplex residential structures.

Residential Construction after 1950

Some of the early forms of the Ranch style house were constructed in Park Hill in the early 1950s. Popularity of the style continued well into the 1960s as evidenced by the thirty-six ranch houses included in the historic district that were built in the neighborhood in this period. Only a few homes have been built in Park Hill since 1970 since Justin Matthews' plan of filling every lot had been largely met. Those houses that have been built in recent years occupy portions of original two-lot or more properties, which have gradually been divided and sold for development.

Schools

Park Hill Elementary School at the corner of J.F.K. Boulevard and "H" Street was constructed in 1923-24. The original two-story brick building with flat roof and parapet, faced east and a grand fieldstone stairway led to the street below (Arkansas-Missouri Highway, now J.F.K. Blvd.). As the population of Park Hill grew, additions were made to the school in 1930, 1948, and 1953. Unsympathetic window replacement on the historic building renders the school non-contributing to the historic district.

Commercial

Of the nineteen buildings in the district constructed for commercial use, only one was constructed prior to 1950. The building at 3723 J.F.K. Blvd. was built to house two retail establishments. For many years a grocery store occupied the southern portion of the building. The entire building is now occupied by a dry-cleaning company that began business in a small space on the north side of this building in the 1950s. Most of the commercial structures, all located along J.F.K. Boulevard, were constructed in the 1960s when fast-food restaurants became popular. Some of the largest picturesque Period Revival homes in Park Hill were demolished for construction of one of the first McDonald's restaurants in Arkansas. Located at 3217 J.F.K. Blvd., construction of McDonald's was soon followed by a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant next door at 3101 J.F.K. Blvd. Other commercial buildings were built in the 1960s and 1970s to accommodate professional offices. Two branch banks were also constructed on J.F.K. Boulevard in this time period. A number of the original 1920s residences located along this thoroughfare have been converted to commercial use and now house professional offices and a variety of specialty retail shops.



*3723 John F. Kennedy
Boulevard, Park Hill
Historic District,
North Little Rock.
AHPP Photo.*

The majority of the buildings and houses in the Park Hill Historic District are in good to excellent condition. The neighborhood has remained stable and is a popular residential area. Despite the changes to the historic fabric of the area's main thoroughfare, John F. Kennedy Boulevard, the residential blocks of Park Hill remain intact. Some demolition has begun to occur in the blocks close to Park Hill Baptist Church as the city's largest congregation grows and has increased need for parking.

The 568 houses, buildings and structures located within the Park Hill Historic District certainly convey a sense of the time and place in which the neighborhood grew and developed. An eclectic mix of 1920s and 1930s Craftsman and picturesque Period Revival architecture and 1940s Minimal Traditional style housing combine to effectively convey the sense of Park Hill's two periods of intense growth.

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