



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

# Settlement of Lawrence County and Powhatan 1803-1890

By Mary Ann Anderson & Ken Story

Originally published by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program in 1991.

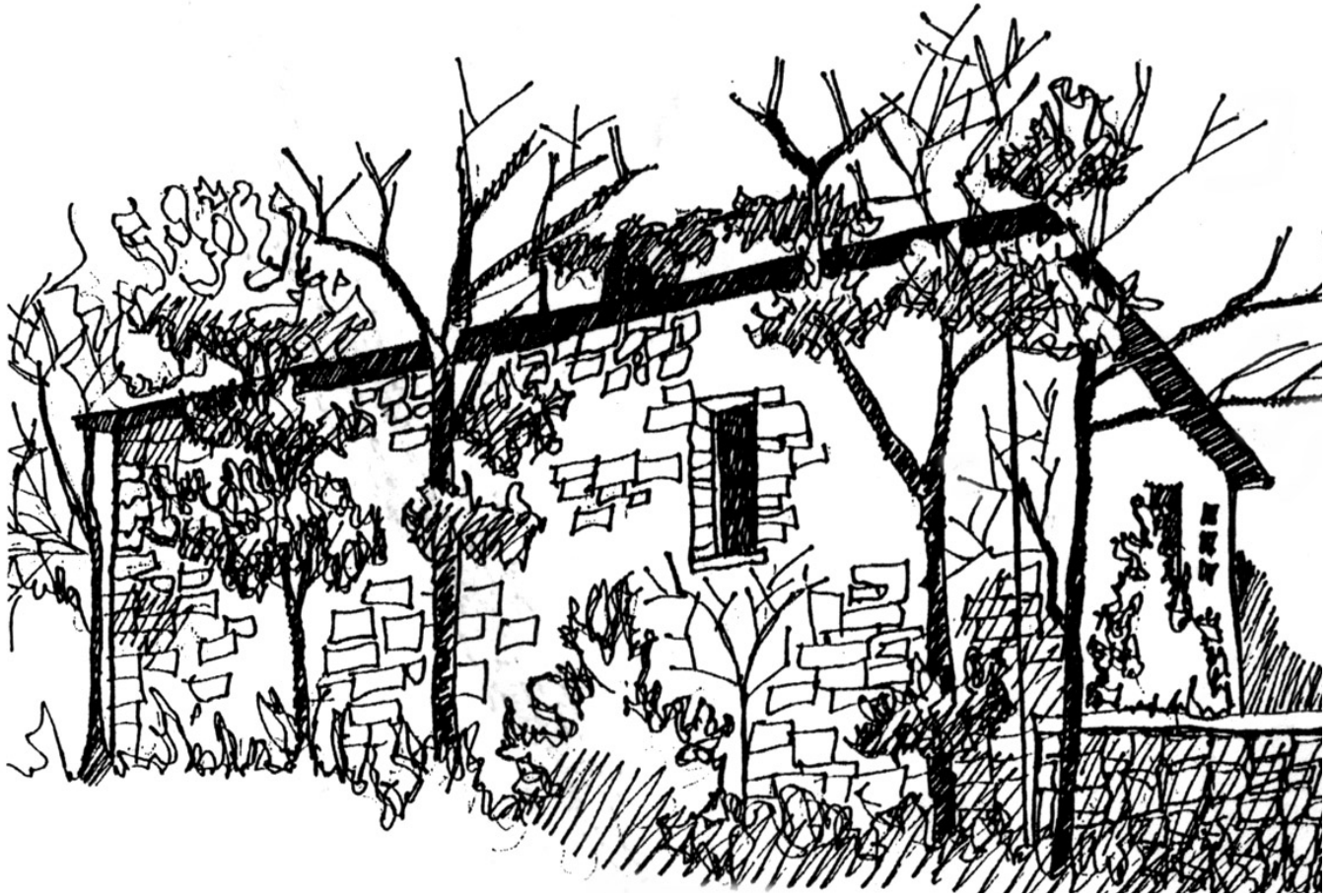
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By Mary Ann Anderson and Ken Story



*Powhatan Jail, Powhatan  
Lawrence County, Arkansas*

Cover illustration by Cynthia Haas

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## SETTLEMENT OF LAWRENCE COUNTY AND POWHATAN, 1803-1890

### Overview

Powhatan became an important river port early in the nineteenth century, when John Ficklin established a ferry on the Black River. Imported goods from New Orleans, St. Louis, and other cities were distributed from this landing, and agricultural products, timber, pearls, river mussels, manufactured goods, and ore were exported. Because Powhatan was the civic center of Lawrence County in 1869, it bustled with activity, especially when the courts were in session, which brought business to local boarding houses and concessions. Although other river ports also developed along the Black River during the same period, Powhatan remained the most important shipping center in Lawrence County until Black Rock usurped that position in 1883, when the Kansas City-Memphis Railroad established a depot there.

Powhatan also enjoyed a civic "prime" until 1887, which ended when the judicial district was divided and Walnut Ridge became the seat of justice for the eastern district of Lawrence County. Later, Walnut Ridge became the permanent seat of justice for the entire county, and the Powhatan courthouse was abandoned until the Lawrence County Historical Society refurbished it for use as a museum. Powhatan today remains one of only a few early river port centers on the Black River with extant historical architectural resources dating to the height of its importance as a civic center, river port, and community.

Lawrence County has over 500 surveyed and recorded archeological sites that indicate occupation by Native Americans, first from the Paleo-Indian period--10,000-8,000 B.C. (Dougan, p. 1; McGimsey, p. 4). Prehistoric and historic Indian sites have been discovered along all Lawrence County rivers. Surface surveys and limited test excavations in the area indicate Dalton, Archaic, Baytown, and Mississippian occupation, revealed by an exploitation of the chert (dull-colored, flint-like quartz often found in limestone) resources available from the foothills of the Ozark Mountain range, just to the west of the Black River. Sites have been discovered in the "bottoms" near old Lauratown on both the east and west banks of the Black River and near Smithville in present-day Lawrence County. Early historic Indian sites will probably be located elsewhere in the county as well, since the Michegamea village recorded by Marquette in 1673 has been located to the north in Randolph County. Excavations at the town of Old Davidsonville on the Black River (just north of the Lawrence County line) revealed prehistoric occupation beneath that historic town. The same can be expected at Powhatan. It is likely that the former ferry crossing at Powhatan was also used by the Indians as a ford and could yield artifacts from an expansive time period (Hester Davis, 1988).

In the late 1700s, some Cherokee families lived along the St. Francis River in what is now the Missouri "boot-heel." The Cherokee and other displaced tribes originating in the eastern region of the United States may well have passed through Lawrence County in the early nineteenth century on their way to Indian territory (Oklahoma).

Historically recorded Arkansas Indian groups are the Quapaw (the Downstream People, also called the Arkansa), the Osage, and the Caddo. There is no evidence that the Quapaw or the Caddo lived in Lawrence County, but the Quapaw may have lived along the rivers of the eastern lowlands (east of Crowley's Ridge). The Caddo occupied the southwest area of present-day Arkansas. The Osage main villages were all in southwest Missouri, but they used much of north Arkansas as hunting territory and were compensated for lands claimed by the U.S. government north of the Arkansas River in the treaties of 1808 and 1818 (Hester Davis, 1988).

## EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

The French were the earliest settlers in the area which became Lawrence County, Arkansas. The land within the present-day boundaries of Lawrence County became part of Arkansas in the following sequence: 1) It was first part of the Territory of Orleans (which included the area we now call Missouri, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana); 2) then, it became part of the State of Louisiana; 3) next, it became part of the Territory of Missouri; 4) it was then, a county in the State of Missouri; 5) it then became part of the Territory of Arkansas; 6) finally, it became a county in the State of Arkansas.

Most French pioneers in the lands that became Arkansas originated in Canada and from the French territory of Louisiana. In 1750, the French settled along the Fourche Dumas, a short tributary to the Black River. In 1762, all French territory west of the Mississippi River was legally transferred to Spain as part of the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which ended the Seven Years' War. Under the Treaty of Ildefonso (1802), Louisiana reverted to France. In 1803 the United States purchased the territory of Louisiana from France for \$15 million--the Louisiana Purchase--and in 1804, Congress divided that land into two territories. The territory south of the 33rd degree of north latitude was named Orleans; the territory north of that line was named Louisiana.

In 1812, the Territory of Orleans was admitted to the Union as the State of Louisiana, which extended from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The territory of Louisiana was then reorganized into the territory of Missouri (which encompassed the area defining Arkansas today) under retiring Louisiana governor Benjamin A. Howard. The new territory of Missouri was divided into five election districts (St. Charles, St. Louis, Ste. Genevieve, Cape Girardeau, and New Madrid) and the election of representatives to the legislature and a delegate to Congress ensued. William Clark was elected governor of Missouri Territory, and a legislative council of nine members and a lower house of 13 members were elected to Congress.

Arkansas County was the first county formed in what was a district in Missouri Territory that encompassed most of the present-day State of Arkansas. In 1813 Arkansas County, which was in the Territory of Missouri at that time, included the land area now defined as the counties of Arkansas, Clark, Pulaski, and Hempstead. The seat of government was moved from Arkansas Post (the first territorial seat of justice in Orleans/Missouri Territory) to St. Louis. Lawrence County was created by an act of the Missouri Legislature under Governor Clark and was divided from New Madrid County, Territory of Missouri, on January 15, 1815, which made it a county in its own right in the Territory of Missouri. On March 2, 1819, Congress established a separate territorial government (intended to begin on July 4, 1819) for the portion of the Territory of Missouri that would remain following admission of the proposed State of Missouri to the Union. The portion not incorporated into the State of Missouri then became part of the Territory of Arkansas.

The act to establish the Territory of Arkansas was precipitated by a Mr. Talmadge of New York and his constituents, who proposed that an antislavery amendment be attached to the act to prohibit any development of slave labor forces in the new Territory of Arkansas. Further, it would free any black children born in the territory who reached the age of 25 after the admission of Arkansas, as a state, to the union. Although the bill (Taylor Amendment) passed in the Senate without incident, it was defeated in the House of Representatives.

Missouri was admitted to the Union under the "Missouri Compromise" in 1820. This compromise was important to the Territory of Arkansas because the remaining portion of the former Missouri Territory (south of the line of 36 degrees, 30 degrees north latitude) in which slavery was permitted became the new Territory of Arkansas in 1819. This opened the way for the development of slave labor forces in the Territory of Arkansas.

## EARLY COUNTIES IN ARKANSAS TERRITORY

Arkansas and Lawrence counties in the Territory of Missouri became the first two counties in the new Territory of Arkansas, established in 1819. Lawrence County was named for Captain James Lawrence (commander of the American vessel, Chesapeake, in the War of 1812) and became known as "the Mother of Counties" by early Arkansans because 31 Arkansas counties (approximately the northern third of the Arkansas Territory) were created from within its original boundaries, described as:

"Beginning at the mouth of the Little Red River, on the line dividing said county (New Madrid) from the County of Arkansas; thence with said line to the River St. Francis; thence up the River St. Francis to the division line between the counties of Cape Girardeau and New Madrid; thence with said last-mentioned line to the western boundary line of the Osage purchase; thence with the last-mentioned line to the northern boundary of the county of Arkansas; thence with the last-mentioned line to the place of beginning."

Today, Lawrence County is bounded clockwise from the north by Randolph, Greene, Craighead, Jackson, Independence, and Sharp counties.

The first permanent settlement in Lawrence County was established in Clover Bend by the Frenchman Peter Le Mieux (variously spelled) around 1800. However two Spanish land grants (one in Lauratown and one in Portia) of questionable legal integrity were assigned by early Spanish claimants to John Baptiste Janis and Joseph Guignolet, respectively, around 1799-1800, when Spanish control in the United States ended. By 1816 these claims were proved, since the two Frenchmen could document that they had continuously occupied their claims from 1803 (Louisiana Purchase).

The presence of Spanish explorers prior to 1800, has also been recorded by earlier historians. A Spanish casket bearing a Spanish or Latin inscription was purportedly unearthed near Lauratown around 1935, although this has not been documented (W.E. McLeod, Arkansas Gazette, May 30, 1937). Father John R. Hume, a resident of Currentview in 1936, purportedly owned a sword, which, from its design, belonged to one of De Soto's men (ca. 1541) and was found near the old county seat of Davidsonville (Wyllie, Arkansas Gazette, "Days of Old Davidsonville," 1936).

In a letter from John B. Treat to Henry Dearborn, secretary of war, dated November 15, 1805, Treat described the population in the area now defined as the State of Arkansas as: "between 60 and 70 families, nine or ten of which are from the three states Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania; the others (one or two Spaniards excepted) are all either French natives; or those who emigrated from...Illinois, New Orleans, and two or three from Europe; all of whom either reside in the Village, or within a circuit of between three and four miles; there are also scattered up the river, seven or eight families; the nearest of them not residing within fifty miles, and the furthest double that distance, by land; which by the meandering of the river is perhaps forty leagues; divided amongst those in this neighborhood, are sixty blacks, seldom more than three in a family, and with one or two exceptions, the whole of them are slaves."

## THE SOUTHWEST TRAIL

Settlement of the Arkansas Territory by Americans of Northern European descent was facilitated by the opening in 1811 of the Southwest Trail (also known as the Military Road and the National Road) by the territorial government of the United States. While the route of the Southwest Trail shifted many times, some historians believe it originated in the Illinois country as an Indian trail and entered Arkansas by way of St. Genevieve, Missouri, crossing southwest to Monroe, Louisiana. In 1765 it was a major military route linking

French settlements to one another. This "corridor" or trail at one time purportedly passed through Lawrence County near the towns now known as Maynard and Jackson, across the Miller ford on Spring River, through the towns of Denton and Lynn, across the Strawberry River, and to the west of the town of Saffell, near Newark and Magness, before crossing the White River.

From the date of the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the earliest non-French settlers immigrated into Arkansas Territory along this trail; they were primarily American-born from English and Scotch-Irish parents, who were established in Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina. By 1831, this trail was a major artery, connecting St. Louis with settlements in Arkansas, through the towns now known as Little Rock, Benton, Rockport, Old Washington, and Fulton. Many pioneers blazed trails through to Texas from this road. Today, the historical route is paralleled by U.S. 67, a two-lane highway between Moark (Clay County) and Texarkana (Miller County).

Some Arkansas immigrants who were veterans of the War of 1812 were entitled by the U.S. government to claim 160 acres each of public lands in the Louisiana Purchase territories. Other claimants were entitled to government-owned lands equal in acreage to their losses as a result of damages suffered in the New Madrid earthquake of 1811. A few of those settlers made claims along the Spring and Strawberry Rivers, in the area which later became part of Lawrence County. According to recorded history, these earliest settlers were: John Miller, father of William R. Miller, governor of Arkansas from 1877-1881; Robert Smith and T.C. Stuart, part owners of the first cotton gin in Lawrence County and civic leaders during territorial years; Solomon Huitt (variously spelled), who operated a ferry on Spring River; John Davidson, then Lawrence County representative to the legislature of Missouri; and John S. Ficklin, a speculator. W.E. McLeod stated that Lawrence County was first settled at the northern boundary of what is now Randolph County, and the settlement pattern progressed south and southwest to the White River, embracing the Black, Current, Eleven Point, Spring, Strawberry, and White River valleys.

In 1814, Congress passed the Preemption Law, which stated that "the first settler on a tract of land of limited acreage, should have first right to occupy it and purchase it. ... Any land not disposed of by Congress as bounties to soldiers or grants or otherwise or reserved was subject to settlement and final purchase by anyone for \$1.25 per acre." Most settlers "squatted" on the land and paid for it while they worked it and processed their paperwork. Since the first survey of Arkansas lands (northwest portion) was completed in 1815, and township surveys were completed by 1820, many settlers lived on their land for years without paying for it under the privilege of the Preemption Law (McLeod, p. 40-41).

In 1815, the territorial government of Arkansas established the county court and the circuit court of Lawrence County. The county government at that time consisted of two branches--the county court and the circuit court. The county court heard all matters related to roads, paupers, and certain kinds of law enforcement; the circuit court's jurisdiction prosecuted cases involving livestock thievery, burglary, violations of slave codes, murder, assault and battery, debt, fornication, Sabbath-breaking, and liquor violations.

The first Lawrence County officers were appointed by Governor William Clark of Missouri. The first judge, Benjamin Johnson, served as both county judge and trial judge but eight justices of the peace were appointed to decide disputes in the settlements until the county was divided into political townships in 1815 (two to each of the four settlements in Lawrence County, according to McLeod). McLeod wrote that the first townships were Spring River, Strawberry, White River, Current River, Columbia, Davidson, Union, Lebanon, and Christian. The first term of the circuit court was held at the home of Solomon Huitt on Spring River, with Judge Benjamin Johnson presiding. The second (October) term was held at the home of Richard Murphy in Spring River Township.

During the October term, a commission was formed to choose a site for the seat of justice for Lawrence County. A site in the town of Lawrence, at the junction of the Black and Spring Rivers, was selected because the town was well located for trade along the navigable Black, Current, Spring, and

Strawberry Rivers and Fourche de Thomas. Lawrence was therefore the first planned community in Lawrence County. Laid out around a central public square (a plan later named "Shelbyville Square") (Stewart-Abernathy, p. 6), the first civic buildings were a two-story brick courthouse, a log jail, and a post office (Price, 1968; Smith and Davidson, 1973:46, Figure 10; Dollar, 1977:7-10, as quoted in Stewart-Abernathy, 1980:6). Lawrence became Davidsonville in 1817, when its name was changed in honor of John Davidson, the first territorial representative elected to the legislature of Missouri. Davidsonville was the site of the first United States Post Office in Lawrence County (built in 1817) and the site of the first federal land office, established to survey and sell U.S. government lands, from 1820-1828. The first surveys were made in 1815. In 1828, the land office removed to Batesville.

The county seat was removed to a town named Jackson, a few miles to the northwest of Davidsonville in 1829. A log courthouse was constructed in 1830, but no jail was built until 1832. Jackson proved to be an inconvenient location since it was more than a mile away from a ferry landing on the Spring River, and the county seat was thus removed to a town named Smithville in 1837. Smithville was situated on a branch of the Southwest Trail just south of Spring River. Patterned after Davidsonville, a two-story, frame courthouse and a log jail were erected on a central public square. When Sharp County was created from the western portion of Lawrence County in 1868, the seat of justice was again moved to locate it centrally within the county. For a period of one year, Clover Bend (approximately seven miles south of Powhatan) was the site of the seat of justice in Lawrence County, and court was held in a rented store building. During the referendum of 1869, Powhatan was favored in a vote of 207 to 6 over Clover Bend as the site of the county seat of justice. Powhatan remained the sole county seat of Lawrence County until 1887, when two districts--eastern and western--were formed and Walnut Ridge took over jurisdiction for eastern district affairs because of its location on the east side of Black River. (The Black River was the dividing line between the two districts.) This decision was made by the legislature in order to appease those citizens who objected to crossing the Black River to attend court during rainy periods, when the crossings flooded. Expensive ferry and bridge tolls were perceived as unfair to east-bank citizens and contributed to the division of jurisdiction. The terms of the circuit court convened at Powhatan in March and August each year and at Walnut Ridge in March and September (Goodspeed, p. 765).

#### FIRST EFFECTIVE SETTLEMENT OF POWHATAN

The town of Powhatan was incorporated in 1866, but its history precedes that event. It was named for the Indian chief Powhatan, whose Indian name was Wa-hun-sen-cawh (c. 1550-1618). English settlers simplified references to the chief by calling him Powhatan, the name of his tribe. The Indian warrior Powhatan commanded approximately thirty tribes in the Virginia tidewater area. He was the father of Pocahontas, who interceded for the life of Captain John Smith in colonial days.

First effective settlement was defined in 1973 by Wilbur Zelinski, cultural geographer. According to his definition, "the first group able to establish a viable, self-perpetuating society in an empty land is of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area," regardless of how small the initial group of settlers may have been (Zelinski, p. 13).

Historians have disagreed about the founder of Powhatan and the first effective settlement of the town. Works Progress Administration researchers claimed that in 1803, John Ficklin, a speculator, settled on land near the west bank of the Black River and by 1820, he had established a ferry landing at Powhatan (first called Ficklin Ferry; later called the Powhatan Ferry). Writers published in Goodspeed's Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northeastern Arkansas stated in 1891 that "John S. Ficklin, the original owner of the site at Powhatan...and John A. Lindsey were early residents near Black River" (Goodspeed, p. 762). In a chapter on Lawrence County, John Ficklin is credited with the founding of Powhatan. However, under an essay about John A. Lindsay (also spelled Lindsey), Lindsay is credited with laying out the town on his farm



and establishing a ferry (Goodspeed, p. 802-803). In 1891, Goodspeed historians affirmed: "Col. John A. Lindsay, farmer and stock raiser is a native of Kentucky, born in Carroll County, Kentucky in 1820. He was the son of General Jesse Lindsay and Priscilla Ficklin Lindsay. When he was 18 years of age, he moved to Lawrence County, Arkansas. (The year was 1838.) ...As George Washington was called the father of his country, so might Col. Lindsay be called the father of Powhatan, as he laid out that town and established the ferry across Black River. Upon his arrival in Lawrence County, he cleared the land, and commenced farming where Powhatan now stands, and at one time owned some 10,000 acres of land in this county." By 1891, Lindsay owned about 2,000 acres in and around Powhatan and was one of the wealthiest men in Ashland Township. John Lindsay deeded Powhatan's Block 38 to Public School District #9 in 1889 (Deed Records).

According to Zelinski's definition of first effective settlement, John Ficklin was the founder of Powhatan. Powhatan was not platted until 1849, and a lack of evidence prevents determination of facts to the contrary. A remote possibility exists that Lindsay may have inherited land from his father, Jesse Lindsay, a general in the War of 1812, who may have received property in Arkansas Territory as a military land bounty. However, this theory has not been proven and would not, in itself, constitute first effective settlement. Since John Lindsay was born in 1820, long after evidence of Ficklin's settlement, a strong argument can be made that Ficklin achieved the "first effective settlement" of Powhatan.

The first steamboat to arrive at Powhatan--the Laurel (75 feet long)--docked at Ficklin Ferry in 1829. Many cargo ships and passengers arrived and embarked from the ferries on Black River, which included landings at Elgin, Clover Bend, Lauratown, and Powhatan in Lawrence County. The Powhatan Ferry increased in importance into the 1880s, when overland road improvements and rail travel began to overtake river passage as the preferred methods of transportation throughout the state. However, in 1820, river navigation was the most reliable means of passenger and freight transportation. The ferry landing (approach and launch) at Powhatan is still apparent although all other tangible evidence, such as the dock and office, is gone. W.E. McLeod described Ficklin Ferry as "the most accessible point at all seasons of the year from Jacksonport to Pocahontas" (approximately 50 miles).

In addition to its importance as a river port, Powhatan was a stop on one of the principal overland routes through Lawrence County. In the late 1830s, a public road was constructed between Pocahontas (northeast of Powhatan) and Jacksonport (southwest of Powhatan). This road passed the aforementioned steamboat landings, making it an important trade and travel route along the Black River. Modern U.S. 67 now parallels this old route. The early road system through Lawrence County, passing near Powhatan, can still be traced, although some segments (particularly those ending on either side of the Black River) have disappeared under heavy vegetation. Some segments that were paved or otherwise improved in the early 1900s are still used by local traffic, however.

The county was crossed by other trails and crude roads also. One of the earliest (1836) roads "laid" originated in IZARD County and extended east to Lawrence County. It then intersected a branch of the Military Road at Smithville and continued east through Powhatan to Greene County. This road, known as the Powhatan-Smithville Road, was impassable during rainy periods, as were most of the other early roads in the county.

Another crude road was named the Old Plank Road because it was made of piled timber and covered with dirt instead of gravel, as it was originally planned. The Old Plank Road, known as the first improved highway in northeast Arkansas, was constructed in 1853. Only three miles long, it crossed the Black River and the "bottoms" at Main Street in Powhatan. A board walkway with commercial establishments lining each side continued up the Main Street hill to the civic center and beyond, to the school and church. This road washed out during periodic rises in the Black River due to poor construction.

A boardwalk was constructed as a connecting link between the Old Plank Road, the business section, and the civic center of Powhatan until it washed out in the flood of 1915.

## CIVIC GROWTH OF POWHATAN, 1803-1890

There was a period of rapid growth and community development in Powhatan shortly after 1869. Three commissioners--Alfred Oaks, Phillip K. Lester, and Emanuel Good--were appointed to select a courthouse site in 1869, when Powhatan was made county seat, and three commissioners--Charles A. Stuart, Charles Coffin, and Solomon W. Redding--were appointed to a building committee in 1871. There was much discontent with the Powhatan site chosen for the courthouse, however, because those attending court from the east side of Black River had to pay ferriage fees, which were later reduced to half-fares by court order to improve the situation.

Apparently the commissioners selected the site for the new courthouse center with greater concern for its aesthetic appeal than for its accessibility. (The terrain is hilly with large boulders.) Blocks 8 and 11 proved to be unsuitable for a "public square" (Shelbyville) after those of Davidsonville and Smithville (Stewart-Abernathy, p. 6). Nevertheless, the land was purchased from Asa T. and John A. Lindsay and Andrew Balfour for \$800 and construction began. The project was financed by the issuing of county bonds in accordance with the Acts of Arkansas, 1871 (p.328).

The first courthouse was described as a large, two-story brick structure with offices below and a courtroom above. It was completed on June 16, 1873, and it burned in 1885. Built at a cost of \$16,723.38 by the firm of Thornton and Jones of Little Rock, it sat majestically upon the hill overlooking the commercial district of old Powhatan. Court records, some dating to 1813, were saved from the disaster because they had been stored in a fireproof vault. A new building commission headed by James P. Coffin contracted for the construction of a new courthouse on the same site, which was completed in 1888 at a cost of \$12,000. The bricks used in its construction were made in a local kiln. Stockard recorded that "The Courthouse is like a fortress on a hill with limestone rocks to guard it." It was designed by architect D.A. McKinnon and built by the firm of Boon and McGinnis. The Powhatan Courthouse, then, as now, was the focal point of the town.

Soon after the construction of the original Powhatan courthouse in 1873, a jail was built on Block 14, 150 feet west of the courthouse in a small valley. Unlike earlier jails, which were constructed of logs or planks (e.g., Smithville jail, 1861), the Powhatan jail was built with native quarried limestone and set upon a stone floor and a sandstone foundation. The rocks were quarried on the farm of Ephram Sharp, four miles north of Strawberry, near the mouth of Reed's Creek in Lawrence County. They were transported by wagon to the building site. Plans for the jail were drawn by Jno. D. Edwards. The contract to build the jail was awarded to Millard King and Company on July 26, 1872. The jail is the oldest civic building in Powhatan, since it survived the fire which destroyed the first courthouse. Unusual because it was constructed of quarried stone instead of logs, the jail housed many criminals who eventually came before the court on charges of "hog stealing, robbery, assault and battery, debt, fornication, Sabbath breaking, disturbing a religious congregation, and various violations of the liquor laws."

Maintaining security at the jail became a problem over time (e.g., prisoners were not safe from mobs). Conditions degenerated and security problems climaxed when a man named Mosby was arrested for murdering his wife and subsequently hung himself in his cell. The jail was then abandoned and its cell blocks were removed and divided among the Walnut Ridge, Hoxie, and Black Rock jails.

Along the overgrown path that approaches the jail from the courthouse is an old pump that supplied the water for maintenance of facilities when the jail was used as a canning kitchen during World War II.

The Powhatan United Methodist Church, a one-story, wood-frame structure, was built in 1874. The church sits on Block 11-A, Lot 1, directly behind the Powhatan jail, at the corner of Sixth and Stuart Streets. The Methodist Episcopal Church at Powhatan was a station of the Newport district of the White River Conference of this denomination. Combined with Walnut Ridge (also part of this station), membership numbered about 100 and Rev. G.W. Smith was pastor in 1891 (Goodspeed, p. 767).

The Powhatan Schoolhouse, located on block 38A (deeded to School District #9 by John A.

Lindsay) at the corner of Seventh and Matthews Street, was constructed in 1889. A simple one-story, two-room frame building sheathed in cypress clapboards and supported by a sandstone foundation, this structure is an excellent extant architectural example of early education facilities in Lawrence County. Both the school and the United Methodist Church were connected to the civic center and main commercial district along the river front by the board walkway that extended from the bank of the Black River at Main Street across town to the school.

According to Goodspeed in a biography on Andrew H. Imboden, a resident of Powhatan, Imboden constructed a schoolhouse in 1854 in which school terms of two months' duration were held. Benjamin F. Matthews, a native of Georgia, was recruited as school master, and the first school was named the Powhatan Male and Female Academy. In 1880, a George Thornburg petitioned the court in behalf of School District #9 for use of the courtroom facilities as a temporary school since the building in use had apparently burned.

According to Goodspeed (p. 766), parents bought "subscriptions" from teachers in the county; that is, they made contracts with teachers, who traveled to and boarded in the homes of students in exchange for educational services. There were 21 female teachers in all of Lawrence County by 1881.

The small towns that grew up around Powhatan (i.e., Portia, Black Rock) benefitted from Powhatan's prosperity but also contributed to its downfall. By 1880 much river commerce was in shared ownership with railroad companies. When Powhatan lost the bid for the railroad bridge across the Black River to Black Rock and a depot was built in Black Rock, Powhatan eventually lost its commercial appeal and along with that its population. Even Powhatan's control of the county seat of the western district of Lawrence County until 1963 did not forestall its declining population over the years. Like the population, the old buildings began to disappear and only a few have survived.

Ironically, the steady economic decline of Powhatan over the years contributed to the survival of its historic resources. Natural forces attempted to reclaim the remnants of the community until restoration of the courthouse began in 1972, 84 years after its construction, and drew attention to the rich history of the town. While some of the civic architectural resources have been sensitively restored, largely the result of diligence on the part of the Lawrence County Historical Society, other important remnants of this historic community (particularly the jail) are in desperate condition and require stabilization to survive. The Powhatan Courthouse, the school and the United Methodist Church were placed on the National Register of Historic Places between 1970 and 1978. A new federal postal service facility was constructed in 1988, and certain lots have been designated for city parks and recreation facilities.

#### COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES AND BUSINESS DISTRICT OF POWHATAN

As the second county formed in Arkansas, Lawrence County, with its early settlements and ferry crossings as well as its various seats of justice, was an important center for commerce by the early days of statehood. Bordered by and crossed with a network of intersecting rivers, the towns settled in Lawrence County were links in the earliest transportation chain for both goods and emigration. The earliest trails into the Territory of Arkansas also passed through Lawrence County and meandered from settlement to settlement, bringing trade, commerce, and civic organization to the earliest counties formed. Recognizing that Powhatan was settled (by Zelinski's definition) as early as 1812, its resources were among the first to be cultivated for the purposes of trade.

According to Fay Hempstead, the notable towns of Lawrence County by 1890 were Powhatan, Walnut Ridge, Minturn, Alicia, Clover Bend, Portia, Black Rock, Smithville, Imboden, Hoxie, Ravenden, Opposition, Strawberry, and Sedgwick.

## LUMBERING AND TRAPPING

Crude trails brought settlers hailing from Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee into Arkansas Territory. In the infancy of Lawrence County, settlers were hunters, trappers, and traders. The natural resources of the county included "richly timbered forests of post, white, willow, black, and red oak; walnut, sweet gum, elm, sycamore, cypress, tupelo and black hickory," and forests were abundant with wildlife. While there was no market for anything but firewood in Lawrence County prior to the advent of railroads, roughly hewn logs were harvested in large quantities from the bountiful forests and exported via the Black River or used locally for house building. Sawmills were developed alongside gristmills as the county grew. Because of the abundance of timber and the advent of the sawmill, the manufacturing firm of James A. Martin and Bros. began building wagons in Powhatan in 1867. Their output was recorded to have been "60,000 spokes per month, felloes, plow beams, implements, spring wagons and buggies." By 1891, Lawrence County boasted 23 sawmills, 20 shingle mills, two spoke factories, and three stave factories, evidence of partial recovery from losses experienced during the Civil war.

## MILLS AND GINS

The agricultural system in early Lawrence County demanded the construction of gristmills, usually water- or steam-driven, followed by sawmills and cotton gins, which also increased trade and commerce. The first gristmill (horse-driven) in the county, according to McLeod, was operated in 1809 by John Janes, who migrated from Virginia. The first water-powered gristmill/sawmill in the county was built by Lewis DeMunn. In recorded history, there were five tanyards, one carding operation (for processing wool), a distillery, and an ice house in operation in Lawrence County prior to the Civil War.

## FARMING

Over time, agricultural practices were begun and Lawrence County citizens farmed for subsistence and profit.

According to Orville Walters Taylor in Negro Slavery in Arkansas, most Lawrence County farms in 1820 were small and cultivated by family members. Some of the early settlers had come to Arkansas from other states with slaves and had developed them as farm laborers to supplant the need for hired laborers such as those used to farm in the northern and eastern states. Taylor wrote that most Arkansas families were not slave-holders in 1820. In that year, only one-ninth of the population of the territory of Arkansas, or 1,617 people, were slaves. The territory had a white population of 12,638 that year.

The population of Lawrence County, as represented in the 1833 census of the Territory of Arkansas, was reported as "4,222 souls, of which seven are free blacks and 434 are slaves." The exact number of slaves and free blacks has been variously reported, and historians have also disagreed about whether or not slavery was as prevalent in Arkansas as in other slave-holding states.

According to McLeod, Powhatan was the local cotton market for a large territory after 1829, when cotton was exported via steamboat from the dock at Powhatan Ferry.

By 1853, the population of Powhatan had grown to 500. By 1857, plantations and farms were well established in Lawrence County. S.A. Hail, who lived in Powhatan before the Civil War, reported that there were "large cotton plantations on the river and landowners had many slaves." The crops cultivated were "corn, oats, wheat, cotton, clover and grasses, fruit, potatoes, turnips and other vegetables." In 1857, Charles Stewart, who owned a 153-acre farm on Spring River, five miles from Powhatan, described the river valley as "convenient, fertile and healthy." By 1880, there were 1,250 farms in Lawrence County, comprising 46,803 acres of improved land.

## MINING

The Spring River Valley, which comprises the western line of the Black River valley is bordered by a 50-foot-high bluff that extends from the northern boundary of Lawrence County near the Spring and Black Rivers through Powhatan to the west. An outcropping of rock formations parallels the bluff line, from which many tons of iron, zinc, and lead were mined, mainly between the years 1855-1891.

A lead mine consisting of 20 pits was dug six miles from Powhatan by E.W. Houghton during the same time the Calamine smelter was in operation. According to public records, 1,000-3,000 tons of lead, some containing silver (galena), were removed, but operations were suspended because of shipping difficulties to processing furnaces. Deposits of zinc carbonate were also discovered at Powhatan in 1857 or 1858. Although Powhatan was a better location for a zinc smelter than Calamine because of its abundant charcoal resources and more accessible river transportation, this new industry developed slowly and flourished only briefly. The Civil War ended both production and shipping activities in this industry. This was a profitable industry because zinc, as a component of brass, was used in galvanized metal roofing, pipes, and paint. The present landscape of Powhatan and old photographs housed in the Powhatan Courthouse Museum bears evidence that large zinc-mining ventures operated there. Large zinc smelters were located in both Ft. Smith and Van Buren.

## PEARLING AND THE BUTTON INDUSTRY

In the spring of 1897, a Dr. J.H. Meyers found a ball pearl weighing 14 grains in the Black River, two miles north of Black Rock. This event caused a rush to harvest river mussels, and tent camps soon appeared along the Black River. The first pearling in Lawrence County was referred to by Stockard as "pearling for profit," in order to distinguish it from the button-making industry that developed later. Between the years 1897 and 1899, dredges, rakes, and tongs were used to harvest pearls. By 1899, pearl fishers had extended their search 150 miles in either direction from Black Rock. Dr. Meyers stated: "After I had found my first pearl...hundreds of people waded the shallow parts of the rivers with gunny sacks. The muscles were so thick in those first years that they were easily picked up. Many pearls were sold for almost nothing...Hundreds were sold from \$5-50 that were really worth from \$100-5,000." Meyers shipped his first carload of shells to Lincoln, Nebraska, for button-making in the summer of 1899. Following this, he said, "Men from the northern states began pouring in, teaching the people to save shells and how to bake them. These men brought in the crowfoot, which enabled them to bring in muscles from deep water."

A button factory was started in Black Rock in 1900--the first such enterprise in the south. It was reported by Stockard that the pearling industry, which netted \$11,000 in 1897, boomed in 1902, netting \$370,000, and that 80 percent of this profit stayed in Randolph, Lawrence, Jackson, Independence, and Woodruff counties in Arkansas. As late as the 1930s, the Black Rock Pearl Button Company, managed by V.C. Howe and owned by Harvey Chalmers Pearl Button Company of Amsterdam, New York, employed 70 men and had a weekly payroll of \$650.

## FISHING

Fishing the Black River had proven to be profitable also, and large spiral nets survive from the early 1900s in Powhatan today.

## PROFESSIONS

Professionals established practices in Powhatan after the Civil War, including six medical doctors and four practicing attorneys (Goodspeed, p. 765).

## BANKS

To help finance business ventures, Col. George Thornburgh bought and sold exchange for Powhatan citizens in 1866. Since there were no banking facilities, the general mercantile business of P.C. Smart and Bros. also conducted exchange business for its customers.

## NEWSPAPERS, ACCOMMODATIONS, AMENITIES, AND OTHER INDUSTRIES

When Powhatan became county seat in 1869, a local newspaper, The Times, was published regularly and the town also supported two hotels--Rogers House and Morrison House--and general merchandise shops. Powhatan had become the shipping center for much of the county and was described by Charles Stewart in a letter to Mr. Burrell Ulley as "a flourishing little town on Black River." Powhatan in its heyday was also described as "a stirring village on the Black River containing wool, flour and saw mills, operated by steam, two churches (Methodist and Presbyterian) and a district school. Cotton and livestock were shipped from Powhatan to other ports, and two passenger stages operated daily between Powhatan and Black Rock at a fare of 50 cents." Mail was delivered twice daily from Black Rock.

By the early 1900s, three boarding houses were operating in Powhatan--the Thompson Boarding House, located in the bottoms below the courthouse; the Rex Boarding House, across the street (Highway 25) from the courthouse; and the Flippo Boarding House, located in the bluffs above Powhatan Ferry, west of present day Highway 25. A barber shop and a shingle mill were also operating in Powhatan in 1900. None of these buildings are extant.

While the construction of Highway 25 changed the orientation of the early town, it did not significantly affect the integrity of the site of the former downtown business district, just to the south of Ficklin Ferry, approximately 50-100 feet inland from the Black River.

Photographs depict the Estes General Store building, located on the waterfront in Powhatan around 1920, and constructed from milled cypress siding. This building, which is no longer standing, faced Main Street (Block 5) and was delimited by the board walkway that formerly connected Main Street with the civic center. Photographic evidence also exists of Block 3, lot 4, behind the extant Telephone Exchange Building, where a barber shop "For Whites Only" (not extant) and another unidentified business separated the commercial downtown district from the residential area and the Powhatan Ferry to the north.

## ARCHITECTURAL RESOURCES OF POWHATAN

The specific architectural styles represented in historic Powhatan are the Victorian-era brick buildings, mid-nineteenth century log residences, vernacular stone buildings, and vernacular Greek Revival wood-frame buildings. Most of the extant historic resources survive from Powhatan's period of prosperity, when it flourished as a civic and commercial center in northeast Arkansas.

## LOG HOUSE

While there are no extant historic buildings dating from the founding of Powhatan, the earliest example of residential architecture, the log house, dates from c. 1850 and is a fine example of the blended building traditions defined as Tidewater South and Midland, characteristic of earlier cabins extant in Arkansas.

The Powhatan log house appears to have been built as a single-pen, side-gabled, dropped-roof cabin and improved by the later addition of a detached kitchen. The fact that Main Street developed around the log house supports the dating of this early residence and indicates that old patterns of living persisted in the midst of growth and change in Powhatan.

The historic name Ficklin-Imboden House has been assigned to this dwelling because Andrew H. Imboden was the earliest (1869) owner of the property (Block 4, Lot 6), which was documented at the Walnut Ridge and Powhatan Courthouses. In 1848, he married Lusinda E. Ficklin, in Powhatan, and this was probably their first home.

The house was occupied until 1970, by a Mrs. Josie Bulla, whose husband, Ed, a retired military serviceman, was a fisherman by trade. The house was also occupied by Justice of the Peace Tom Watson around 1920. It was recently deeded to the Lawrence County Historical Society for the purposes of preserving the historic district found in Powhatan. It has been unoccupied for some time and is threatened by environmental neglect.

Historic photographs from the early nineteenth century indicate that the downtown commercial area remained centered at the junction of Main and First Streets well into the 1900s, with in-fill housing developing in blocks around that hub.

Very early residences in Lawrence County were described by Dallas Tabor Herndon in the following way:

"The log cabin was the universal type of dwelling in 1836, when Arkansas was at the threshold of statehood...Those of the better class were of the kind known as 'saddle-bags;' that is, one cabin on each side of a wide hall or open 'entry' sometimes called 'the dog-run.' From this type of dwelling originated the expression--'the three P' order of architecture--two pens and a passage. In a house of this character, one 'pen' was used for the general living room and the other as the kitchen and dining room. The sleeping apartments were frequently in the loft and were reached by means of a ladder.

"Those who were unable to afford a 'three P' cabin had to be content with one consisting of a single large room...The first cabins were of round logs, but a little later, some of the more aristocratic of the pioneers built themselves hewn-log houses, a few of which were two full stories in height and provided stairways instead of a ladder."

In 1837, the log houses of Smithville, west of Powhatan, were described as "log construction (many double log cabins), chinked, and painted with long porches in front," which also describes the Powhatan log cabin. Following the Civil War, many of the porches of the cabins in Smithville were removed and replaced with porticoes. The log home of Filmore Gibbons, near Smithville, which matched Herndon's description of early log homes, was documented photographically in 1908. He and his family stood in front of their hewn-log home, which had a long shed roof. It was a single-pen, single-gabled cabin with an external-end fireplace.

## TELEPHONE EXCHANGE BUILDING

First Street, which is now paved and runs parallel to the Black River, begins at Lindsay Street near Ficklin Ferry and curves back to the riverbank at Matthews Street where it terminates. It was the earliest site of commerce in Powhatan. Main Street, which runs perpendicular to First Street, linked the commercial district to the civic district (courthouse and jail).

The Telephone Exchange Building, located on the corner of First and Main Streets, is the oldest extant commercial building in the town. This Victorian Panel Brick structure, which mimics the courthouse on a smaller scale, sits distinctively in the bottoms. The earliest home of record, the Andrew Balfour house (not extant), stood at the corner of First and Main Streets, where the Telephone Exchange Building has stood since 1887. Andrew Balfour, original owner of the land on which the Telephone Exchange Building now sits, was among the first recruits of the Confederate Army in the spring of 1861 and became an officer (Goodspeed, p. 767). Following the war, he was a prominent physician in Powhatan, and it was at the site of his home that the 1887 session of the county court was conducted following the 1885 burning of the original Powhatan Courthouse, which was built in 1873. Balfour owned the site as late as 1880. Tax records reveal that the site had a value of \$75 that year. In 1885, the property was deeded by the Balfour Estate to C.H. and Max Coffin and had a value of \$50. The tax records in Walnut Ridge prove that in 1887, taxes on Lot 6, Block 3 jumped to \$400 (Lawrence Co. Real Estate Tax Book, p. 160), probably because this new building was constructed in the middle of the Powhatan commercial district. It was constructed of the same materials and during the same period of time as the new courthouse was built. This building had multiple uses over time. It was used as an apothecary by Charles A. Bellsnyder, who dispensed medications for the ailing. He was followed by Joseph Martin of the same profession. It was owned in later years by an F.G. Martin, who sold it to his sons, I.W. and I.A. Martin, who used it to house the offices of their prosperous wagon factory.

Walter McLeod claimed the building was used for the central office of the first telephone line in Lawrence County, which established communication between Walnut Ridge, Powhatan, and Smithville. The telephone system and the building were purchased by a George W. Anderson, who extended services to most of the towns in Lawrence County. In 1900 he sold the system and the building to E.J. Mason, William De Armon, and F.W. Tucker. The building was damaged by hail in 1902, and its use as a telephone exchange building ended.

In later years it was used as the office of an attorney, L.B. Poindexter. When Mr. Poindexter sold the building to Sanders J. Zimmerman, it became a general merchandise building. In 1920, it was purchased by Luther and Ida Belle Flippo, who retained the general merchandise business in the front of the building and opened a federal post office in the back. When the post office was relocated to a metal building on the grounds of the courthouse in 1930, the Telephone Exchange Building became a private residence until 1977. It is currently unoccupied and in need of repair.

## JAIL

The Powhatan jail is an early example of a stone-construction blockhouse security facility. Dating to the construction of the first courthouse (1873), the jail was an integral part of the civic complex of Powhatan. There are few extant stone buildings dating to 1873 in Lawrence County, particularly buildings used for this purpose.



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**LAWRENCE COUNTY SITES LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER  
OF HISTORIC PLACES**

**CLOVER BEND**

**Clover Bend Historic District**, Hwy. 228, contains high school and other buildings erected 1937-42 in Farm Security Administration project.

**IMBODEN**

**St. Louis-San Francisco Overpass**, Hwy. 62 over Spring River, 1937 steel Pratt deck-truss bridge.

**Dr. John Octavius Hatcher House**, 210 W. 3rd St., 1902-03 transitional Queen Anne/Colonial Revival design.

**PORTIA**

**Home Economics/F.F.A. Building**, inside Portia, 1938 community/school building erected by Works Progress Administration.

**Portia School**, City Park, 1914 red-brick school house.

**POWHATAN**

**Powhatan Courthouse**, overlooking Black River, Beaux Arts-style 1888 courthouse.

**Powhatan Methodist Church**, Hwy. 25, 1872 Greek Revival frame church.

**Powhatan School House**, Hwy. 25, ca. 1880 wood-frame school building.

**Ficklin-Imboden House**, 3rd and Main, ca. 1850 log home of Lawrence County pioneers.

**Telephone Exchange Building**, 1st and Main, 1887 vernacular panel-brick structure.

**Powhatan Jail**, Hwy. 25, 1873 vernacular stone jail.

**RURAL LAWRENCE COUNTY**

**Cache River Bridge**, Hwy. 412 spanning Cache River, 1934 Parker pony truss bridge.

**SMITHVILLE**

**Smithville Public School Building**, Hwy. 117, 1936 fieldstone structure built by Works Progress Administration.

**WALNUT RIDGE**

**Missouri-Pacific Depot**, 1st St., ca. 1910 Mediterranean-style structure.

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**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

# Settlement of Lawrence County and Powhatan 1803-1890

By Mary Ann Anderson & Ken Story

Originally published by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program in 1991.

This volume is one of a series developed by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) for the identification and registration of the state's cultural resources. For more information, write the AHPP at 1100 North Street, Little Rock, AR 72201, call (501) 324-9880, or send an e-mail to [info@arkansaspreservation.org](mailto:info@arkansaspreservation.org).

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