

Walks through History
Historic Downtown Leslie
Begin at the Ozark Heritage Arts Center & Museum, 410 Oak Street
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By: Rachel Silva

Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of downtown Leslie. I’d like to thank the Searcy County Historical Society for co-sponsoring the tour, and the Ozark Heritage Arts Center & Museum (and Jeff Stansberry) for opening their facility today. And many thanks go to Adrienne Freeman, Shirley Gray, and James Johnston for their help with the tour.

In 1993 the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program nominated about 50 properties in Searcy County to the National Register of Historic Places under a context called “History and Architectural Heritage of Searcy County.” Several of those properties are located in Leslie, and I’ll point them out as we go today.

Brief History of Searcy County & Leslie

In 1835 Arkansas’s Territorial Legislature created Searcy County, which was named in honor of Richard Searcy, prominent attorney, landowner, and circuit court judge for the Batesville district (who had died in 1832). The first Searcy County encompassed what are now Searcy and Marion counties and parts of Boone, Baxter, and Stone counties. In 1836 Searcy County was renamed Marion in honor of Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion. However, by 1838 the southern half of then-Marion County had grown in population, prompting the Arkansas Legislature to create a second Searcy County from this portion. The Searcy County seat was first established at Lebanon on Bear Creek, and in 1856 it was moved to an area known as Raccoon Springs, which was subsequently named Burrowsville after Napoleon Bonaparte Burrow, a prominent planter and politician from

Crawford County. During the Civil War, Searcy County residents were generally opposed to secession, and many men tried to avoid service in the Confederate Army. The anti-Confederate Arkansas Peace Society was active in the county and throughout north central Arkansas until the state militia began arresting members for treason. Although there were no major battles in the county during the Civil War, Searcy County was plagued by guerilla attacks, looting, and overall lawlessness. Because the county seat's namesake, N. B. Burrow, had been a slave-owner and Confederate supporter, Searcy County Unionists pushed to have the town renamed. In 1867 Burrowsville was renamed Marshall in honor of U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall.

Present-day Leslie was originally known as Wiley's Cove, which was supposedly named after a Cherokee resident called Chief Wiley who settled along Cove Creek. Samuel Leslie was born in Kentucky in 1809, and in 1838 he moved his family to Searcy County and settled at Wiley's Cove. Early white settlers (like the Leslie family) engaged in hunting and subsistence farming to survive. A post office was established at Wiley's Cove in 1842. Samuel Leslie died in 1886, and the following year (1887) his son, Andrew Jackson Leslie, had the name of the post office changed to Leslie in honor of his late father.

Leslie was a relatively isolated mountain community until September 1903, when the St. Louis & North Arkansas Railroad (became the Missouri & North Arkansas in 1906) extended its line to Leslie, making it the railroad's southern terminus (until 1907, when the M&NA extended the line toward Searcy and down to Helena, which was finished in 1909). The railroad constructed an engine shed and shop buildings at Leslie as well. In 1906 the H. D. Williams Cooperage Company moved its facilities from Poplar Bluff, Missouri, to Leslie and soon claimed to be the largest barrel producer in the world (or at least west of the Mississippi River). The Williams Company employed 1,200 men and produced 4,500 barrels daily. The company also operated a sawmill, plant for making telegraph brackets and pins, a planing mill, and a hub factory. The Williams Company brought in black laborers to work in the factories and built houses for them north of Begley's Creek. The black residential area was called "Dink Town."

Leslie was attractive to timber-related industries because of its vast stands of virgin white oak trees. In 1906 and 1907 the Williams Company constructed an 18-mile spur track from Leslie to the southwest, ending at the headwaters of the Little Red River. Known as the “Dinky Line,” the spur track allowed the company to haul large loads of timber out of the forest. There was a small community of lumberjacks at the end of the Dinky Line, appropriately called “The End of the Line.” Lumberjacks from Witts Springs, Star Mountain, and other outlying areas brought timber to the “End of the Line” so it could be hauled to Leslie. The community had a company store, blacksmith shop, boarding house, eat shack, mule barn, and a few dwellings. The population consisted of about 25 people, 35 mules, and a few dogs. In addition to the timber industry, the area around Leslie was ideal for growing all types of grains and grasses like wheat, oats, and alfalfa as well as fruit trees, especially apples, peaches, and pears. And cut-over land was often used for livestock.

The Missouri & North Arkansas Railroad built a stone depot at Leslie about 1914 to replace the wood depot erected by the St. Louis & North Arkansas in 1903 (this depot may have been dedicated in May 1913, but it does not appear on the 1914 Sanborn). In the 1910s, Leslie was home to the Williams Cooperage Company (which later became the Export Cooperage Company), Pekin Stave Company, a hub mill and ice & electric light plant operated by Mays Manufacturing Company, Cooper & Company box factory, Leslie Milling Company (ground wheat, corn, and animal feed), a wholesale grocery, Derickson Creamery, Canning & Cold Storage Company, several hotels and churches, a 2 ½-story school building, a telephone exchange, and a thriving commercial district with a variety of stores. Leslie was booming.

But the boom years were short-lived, for the Missouri & North Arkansas relocated its railroad shops to Harrison in 1912, and fires at the Williams Cooperage Company in June 1911 and November 1912 devastated the business, leading to its closure a few years later. Although the Export Cooperage Company resumed operations at the old Williams site, it could not contend with external factors like

prohibition, the M&NA Railroad strike, and the Great Depression. Prohibition hurt the barrel industry because many of the barrels were used to hold wine, whiskey, and other spirits. Unhappy about wage cuts, in February 1921 M&NA workers went on strike. The M&NA attempted to keep the line running but had to deal with vandalism and intimidation from the strikers. Finally, the line was closed for several months. “Citizens’ committees” formed across the region to combat the strikers, and the KKK got involved on the side of the railroad as well. Anti-union hysteria ensued, resulting in the lynching of a striking railroad employee in January 1923. By the end of the 1920s, Leslie’s timber resources were depleted, and then the Great Depression hit, making things even more difficult. Leslie’s boom years were over.

The M&NA (called the Missouri & Arkansas Railway beginning in 1935) ceased operations in September 1946, and salvage of the tracks began in 1949. There’s not much evidence of the railroad tracks through downtown Leslie today.

Go outside in front of arts center/museum

Leslie Gymnasium/Community Hall (Ozark Heritage Arts Center & Museum)—built 1936-1938 by the Works Progress Administration to serve as a school gymnasium and community building. You can still see the basketball court in the main auditorium with Leslie’s mascot, the bulldog, painted at half-court. The Leslie Gym is almost identical to the 1938 WPA-built Greenwood Gym in Sebastian County. Both buildings were constructed with native stone and have a very similar design and floor plan. Local residents Rex and Daphne (Daph-na) Killebrew donated the money to convert the gym into an auditorium.

Site of Old Main—The 1909 Leslie Public School building, fondly referred to as Old Main, was located northeast of the gym. The 2-story, red brick building had a full basement and faced Oak Street. You can still see the original concrete retaining wall and steps up from the street, which led to the front door of the school. The school originally housed all students—1st through 12th grades—who were taught by 11 teachers, all of whom were women. Old Main was demolished after the

1966-67 school year. In 1967-68, a building to the west of the Old Main site served as the school. The current school building was under construction in the late 1980s.

Oak Street

NW corner High & Oak—311 Oak—J. C. Miller House (NR-listed 1993)—ca. 1905 American Foursquare with Colonial Revival-style porch. The J. C. Miller family occupied the house in the 1920s.

307 Oak—Dr. Cleveland Hollabaugh House (NR-listed 1993)—ca. 1910 Craftsman-style house with hipped-roof dormers, windows with a multi-pane sash above a single, fixed pane sash, and a full front porch. Dr. Hollabaugh was a physician here in the early 20th century. He graduated from Vanderbilt Medical School in 1907 and came to Leslie to practice, largely because there was a great need for physicians in a mountain town where industrial and railroad accidents were common. He practiced in Leslie from 1910 until his death in 1926, with a brief hiatus during World War I, when he served as a doctor in the U.S. Army. His office is located next door at 305 Oak and was constructed about 1915 out of ornamental concrete block. They used the “rock face” mold to create concrete blocks that resembled cut stone.

In the early 20th century, Leslie’s Baptist church was located on the south side of Cherry Street between Main and High streets. Judging from the front windows, the current First Baptist Church building was constructed at the southeast corner of Oak & Center ca. 1930. When was the rock veneer added?

White house at NE corner Oak & Center—ca. 1910 Folk Victorian/Colonial Revival-style house with a pressed metal roof. May have been constructed by Leslie physician J. O. Cotton. More on him later.

North side of Oak—commercial block between Center & Main

First 3 buildings—built ca. 1914 out of concrete block. In the 1910s, going east to west, these buildings (3 buildings but 4 storefronts at that time) housed a movie theater, pool hall, general merchandise store, and a restaurant. In the 1940s, the restaurant was called the Do-Kum-In Café.

2-story building—A 2-story building on this site is clearly visible in a historic photo of this block—it was brick, but I’m not sure what was in it.

213-215 Oak—brick building with original wooden bulkheads and recessed storefront doors. Built ca. 1915 and housed a confectionery on the east side and a grocery/meat market on the west side.

American Legion Post #131—south side of Oak Street—point out the old portion of the building. NR-listed 1993. Built in 1935 with WPA labor under the supervision of local resident Lloyd Harness. The hut was designed in the Rustic style of architecture. Called the Henderson & Matheny Post in honor of Roy W. Henderson, who was killed in action in France during WWI on August 8, 1918, and John Flake Matheny, who died of pneumonia during the war on January 30, 1919.

Back to commercial block facing Oak—

Some of the oldest commercial buildings in Leslie and the most unaltered (with the exception of one building with just the front wall)...built ca. 1905 and all good examples of early 20th century commercial-style architecture with upper façade details like brick corbelling at the cornice, recessed brick panels, and decorative vents; wooden bulkheads; recessed storefront entrances; transom windows; and cast-iron storefront columns.

In 1919, going east to west, the storefronts were occupied by a printing business, grocery, movie theater, barber shop (Buck Collins was the barber here, and there were showers in the back of the shop for patrons), and the Meek Building is on the corner.

[The vacant lot with just a brick façade—the building was still intact in a 2000 photo.]

Meek Building at northeast corner Oak & Main—NR-listed 2000—The Meek Building was built ca. 1905 and features a distinctive beveled corner entrance. In 1907 Roy C. Meek bought the property from G. T. Blair and opened the R. C. Meek Grocery Company in the corner storefront. A millinery (ladies' hat and accessory shop) occupied the eastern storefront, and the telephone exchange was upstairs.

In January 1912 a fire destroyed a block of commercial buildings on the north end of Main Street between Oak and Elm behind the Meek Building. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that the following buildings were destroyed—Russ Shoe Store, Porch Drug Store, the post office, Meek's grocery warehouse, Crampton's Hotel and a vacant building adjoining the hotel, and Dr. Hollabaugh's office. Fortunately, the Meek Building survived the fire. In February 1927 the Meeks sold the property to G. W. Hogg, who was then mayor of Leslie. He opened the G. W. Hogg Meat Market, and the upstairs was used for professional offices, including those of the Arkansas Land Company and D. T. Cotton, lawyer. The building was still occupied by a grocery in 1967. In recent memory, the building has been called the Carousel, which was a soda fountain and antique business, as well as the Corner Pocket, a pool hall.

[The Meek Building was awarded a grant from the AHPP in 1998 to replace the second story windows with historically correct 1-over-1 windows...at some point, the windows had been replaced with non-historic false-muntin windows.]

North end of Main

Killebrew House—built about 1915. The house was originally oriented toward the west, facing the M&NA Railroad tracks. Presumably after the railroad's heyday, the owners switched the orientation of the house to front on Main (the back of the house is now the front). Greek Revival style with massive Doric columns and an entrance topped by a triangular pediment. This house belonged to Rex and Daphne (Daphna) Killebrew, who gave money for the old gym/arts center &

museum and the park at the corner of Oak & Main. The Killebrews also offered money to Main Street merchants who wanted to rehab their storefronts.

Leslie Roller Mill site—The 3-story, wood-frame roller mill was built in 1910 to process locally-grown wheat from the Leslie area. In 2004 a storm badly damaged the building, and what remained standing was later cleared. The mill was located just south of Begley's Creek, which was named for early settlers Henry and John Begley.

[The Williams Cooperage Co. was located north of town—point in that direction from here.]

NW corner Main & Oak (mixed masonry and ornamental concrete block building)—built ca. 1930 with salvaged construction material from a building that was demolished on the south end of Main Street near city hall. Beginning in the late 1940s or early 1950s, this building housed Findley Grocery store.

West end of Oak

Derickson Lumber Co. buildings—built ca. 1915 with ornamental concrete block. Obviously, the storefront windows and door openings have been altered. In 1919 the easternmost building was vacant, the next building was a feed warehouse, and the last two buildings (with the Pepsi machine and the last building) housed the Derickson Creamery, Canning & Cold Storage Company. [Derickson Lumber is a 3rd generation family-owned business in Leslie.]

Leslie Wholesale Grocery (2-story rock building)—built 1908 by the Berryville Grocer Company. It later became Leslie Wholesale Grocer Company, followed by M-K Wholesale Grocery. Born in 1877, James Marshall Lack was associated with his grandfather in the general merchandise business in Big Flat and then became a traveling salesman for Ed Rand's Rand Wholesale. Mr. Lack traveled up and down the M&NA line selling merchandise. Ed Rand later made Lack manager of his Leslie Wholesale Grocer Company. In 1933 Lack bought the business. He died in

1946 and left the business to his widow, Nell Mabrey Lack. She sold some of it to Homer Kuykendall and W. D. Ketcheside. Her son, Loren L. Lack, was manager and had worked there since 1922. Loren Lack bought back all the shares of the business in April 1972, but he died in October of that year. His widow, Lorna Halbrook Lack, who had worked in the grocery for years, sold the building to Derickson Lumber.

Missouri & North Arkansas Railroad Depot (NR-listed 1992)—built 1913-1914 to replace an earlier wooden depot erected by the St. Louis & North Arkansas Railroad in 1903 on the same site. The M&NA Depot is significant because of its stone masonry construction, pressed metal roof with cresting along the ridge, and because it is the only tangible evidence of the railroad remaining in Leslie. The railroad tracks ran just to the west of the depot. A café was located in the north end of the Leslie depot. There is still some original pressed tin ceiling in the depot, along with some original windows and sliding freight doors. [A geodetic survey marker was placed on the west side of the depot in the exterior wall.]

Cove Creek Bridge—built in 1930 by the Arkansas State Highway Commission with B. H. Heard, contractor, and C. S. Christian, engineer.

Old service station/body shop across Hwy. 65 (became a state highway in 1926?)—old photo shows the smallest building as a Sinclair service station with adjacent body shop. The photo was taken sometime after the completion of the Cove Creek Bridge in 1930.

Main Street, going south

East side of street—city park—there was a large, 2-story building on this site in the early 20th century that housed a general store; the building (and much of the east side of this block) burned in 1936. The Killebrews financially supported the creation of this park.

Next 2 buildings on east side—built ca. 1940. The cement on the south side of Elk & Eagle was used as a flat, white surface for projecting movies (1940s).

West side of the street—2-story building with 2 storefronts (one of them is Old Mercantile Antiques)—built ca. 1910 and housed hardware (maybe Killebrew Hardware?) and dry goods stores in the early 20th century. The building was later home to the City Drug Store, with U. M. Sutterfield, proprietor.
Brick corbelling at cornice, transoms, cast-iron storefront columns.

New Life—2-story building constructed ca. 1915. Housed furniture store in 1919. Later became part of Killebrew Hardware and housed a dentist office upstairs.
Brick corbelling and arched window openings on second story.

Leslie Café—built ca. 1915 and was a bank in 1919. In the mid-20th century, this was Leslie State Bank. Has a slipcover over the original façade.

Brown brick building—built ca. 1918. Housed Cotton Drug store. The Killebrews later operated the fabric store that was here. Brick corbelling.

Brown & blue stucco (one is Arkansas Handmade)—built ca. 1915. Brick building with 2 storefronts. Now covered with stucco. Housed a large dry goods, clothing, and shoe store in the 1910s. This may have been the Redwine Store. The brown stucco side was a movie theater.

Rough-cut stone building—built ca. 1920. Still has original storefront windows with transoms and recessed entry.

East side of street—small, concrete block building, ca. 1940.

3 historic brick buildings at NE corner of Main & Walnut—northernmost one—built ca. 1915. Was a confectionery in 1919. Brick corbelling, transoms, cast-iron columns.

Middle one—built ca. 1910. Housed a drug store. Less elaborate detailing and altered front entrance.

Corner building—Farmers Bank Building (NR-listed 1993). Built ca. 1905. Farmers Bank was incorporated in May 1905, followed by the Searcy County Bank, American Exchange Bank, and the Leslie State Bank (where were these other banks located?). The Farmers Bank Building is a vernacular interpretation of the Romanesque style of architecture with arched window openings and a beveled corner entry supported by a large column. The vault is still in the building. The rear portion of the building originally served as the bankers' offices (and later housed a doctor's office). In the 1930s, this building became the post office, which remained here until a new post office was built on the north end of Main Street in 1985. Now Serenity Farm Bakery.

West side of street—buff brick storefronts—probably built in the 1930s or 40s?

Dave's Auto Parts—built ca. 1908. Housed a general merchandise store and later a flour & feed store. Interesting to note the bricked-in arched window openings on the north side of the building—this is indicative of the fact that the building was constructed early on, and there was nothing right next to it yet.

Cross Walnut

Lewis Grocery—was located in a historic building at the southwest corner of Main & Walnut, but they demolished it and built the current metal building. This is also a 3rd generation family-owned business in Leslie (almost 3rd generation?).

513 Main (rough-cut stone with green metal on front)—built 1905 as a grocery. In 1910s, it was a general store, followed by a frame shop, Western Auto (by 1976 or earlier), and an antique store. The owners lived upstairs.

Note original cast-iron storefront columns. Sanborn maps show a shed addition on the north side of the building for keeping salt as well as a loading platform. There was later a shed addition on the south side for feed and other things. The original pressed tin ceiling is still extant above the drop ceiling.

City Hall—The City Hall building has recently been renovated (substantially altered from its original appearance). It is a historic building constructed about 1915 and has always housed the city hall. The city jail was underneath the building and accessible from the back side.

[There were two more historic buildings just to the north of City Hall, one of which housed the post office before it moved to the Farmers Bank Building in the 1930s.]

G. W. Smith 1906 Building—Built 1906 to house George W. Smith’s grocery business. Although the transom windows are covered, the building remains relatively unaltered. When Leslie was incorporated as a city in 1906, George W. Smith was elected the first mayor. He was a charter member of the Wiley’s Cove Masonic Lodge and later served as a notary public, signing many deeds and mortgages. The old Smith House is located behind the 1906 commercial building and faces Cherry Street.

Columbus Hatchett House (NR-listed 1993)—ca. 1910 Colonial Revival-style house. The house was constructed by local residents Columbus Hatchett and M. Shannon with ornamental concrete blocks (“beveled edge” for walls and “rock face” for quoins) made by Bob Hardin. Colonial Revival details include the porch supported by Tuscan columns and Palladian windows in the gable ends. The home also has a pressed metal roof and some historic outbuildings.

[The 2-story Chaspert Hotel (run by Mr. Smilie) was located across Main Street from the Hatchett House in the early 20th century. The building is no longer extant. Dr. Hollabaugh set up a school in competition with Leslie Public School sometime in the early 20th century, and the school was located inside the Smilie Hotel, which had formerly been known as the Chaspert.]

Back up Main to Walnut and east on Walnut

210 Walnut—new red brick house—site of old hotel. Notice the old rock steps at the corner and the retaining wall. This was the Brannum Hotel.

207 Walnut—Dr. Clay House (NR-listed 1993)—ca. 1907 Folk Victorian house constructed for Leslie physician Dr. Clay.

Leslie United Methodist Church—They recently celebrated the centennial anniversary of their building. This church was constructed by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (Leslie was home to the ME South, ME North, and ME churches).

In 1919 the 2-story Lawrence Hotel was located across Walnut Street from the Methodist Church. It was later called the Wylke Hotel; no longer extant.

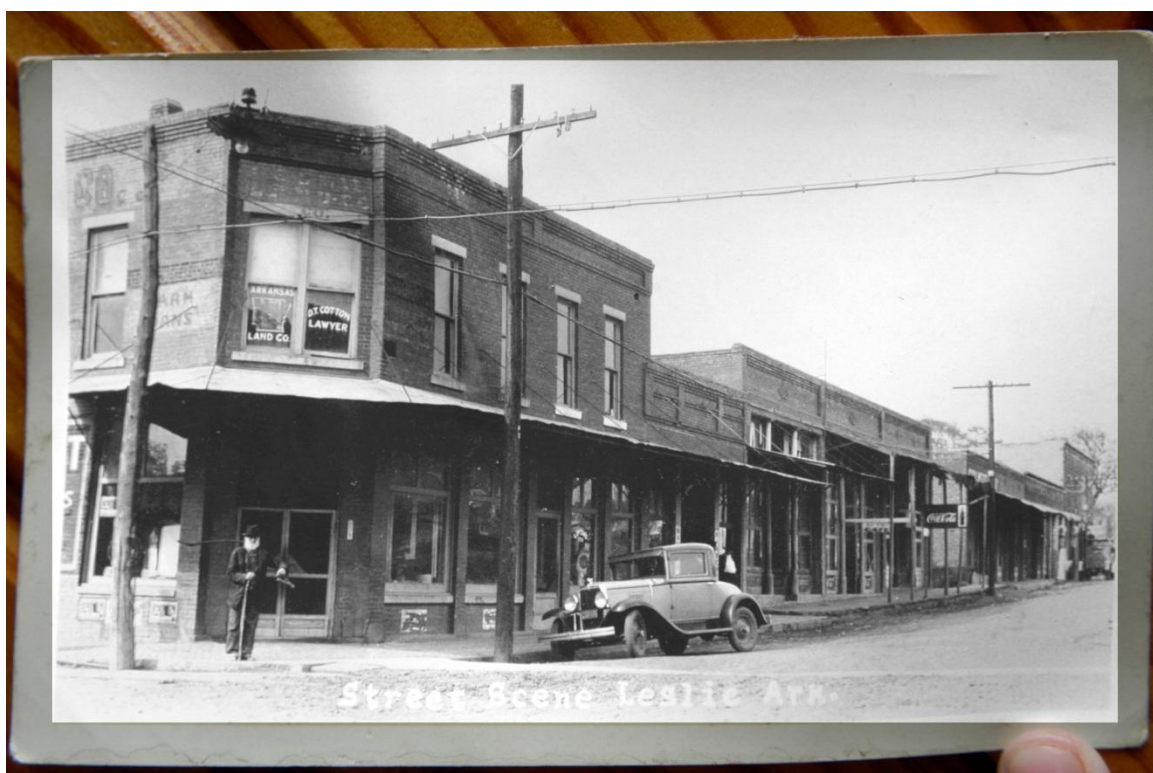
Skylark Café—Dr. J. O. Cotton House (NR-listed 1993)—ca. 1915 Craftsman-style house with a front porch supported by massive, square porch supports and exposed rafter tails. Dr. James Oliver Cotton was born near Leslie in 1872. Dr. Cotton taught school for 3 years and decided the town needed a doctor. He attended Barnes College in St. Louis, which is now Washington University, and graduated in 1899. He started his medical practice in his home and founded the first drug store in Leslie in 1903. He was a physician for the timber and sawmill crews and frequently rode the Dinky Line out to the woods to treat men. He delivered more than 3,000 babies. He was a large landowner and also served as city treasurer. Dr. Cotton died in 1959 at the age of 87.

Walk down Walnut until you reach the back entrance to the Heritage Center parking lot.

Thank you!



Leslie Public School



Northeast corner of Main & Oak



M & NA Depot at Leslie



Looking west toward Cove Creek Bridge and Hwy. 65



Looking south on Main from intersection of Oak & Main