

**Walks through History Tour  
Dumas Commercial Historic District  
November 11, 2017  
By: Holly Hope**



**Introduction:**

**Thank you to Main Street Dumas executive Director Jann Farmer for hosting us today.**

Today we will look at the 7 contributing buildings and 1 individually listed building that make up the historic district. In order to get a commercial historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a municipality must have a

concentrated area of historic buildings with at least 51% of them eligible for the National Register (called contributing buildings).

Then 51% of the property owners must support the National Register designation for the nomination process to go forward. In the case of Dumas, there are 4 non-contributing buildings and 1 non-contributing site within the commercial historic district, but the number of contributing buildings outweighs those that do not (non-contributing means they are ineligible for the NR). The Merchants and Farmers Bank building was individually listed on the National Register in 1982 and is also part of the district.

### **Brief History of Desha County**

Desha County was formed December 12, 1838. With the Mississippi River as its eastern boundary, Desha County is known for its fertile Delta soil. Desha County is primarily cleared farmland now, but in 1890 The county was still partially timbered.

In fact, the lumber industry was one of the county's most important interests. In the 1800s, Dumas is described as being a virgin swamp and wilderness with no more than 100 acres of cleared land in the area. The area contained wild game like bears, bobcats, deer, and turkey, which provided food for early settlers.

Ever since the land was settled and cleared, agriculture has been the lifeblood of the county. Cotton dominated the economy of Dumas until after World War II. Rice was first planted in Desha County in 1945. Soybeans were introduced to Desha County in the 1960s. Currently, the principal crop yield is balanced between cotton, rice, soybeans, corn, and wheat.

There were no levees on the Mississippi or Arkansas Rivers at that time, so many areas of Desha County flooded quite often (the first flood control plan was established by the Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission, which was created by Congress in 1879—Desha County's 2 levee/drainage districts were established in 1891, but the levee was under construction in 1901 near Watson).

The frequent flooding caused many problems in the county's early days because it destroyed crops and property, not to mention the problems it caused with the railroad. The Little Rock, Pine Bluff, and New Orleans Railroad tried to construct two different railways beginning in the early 1860s, but both plans failed. Once a rail line was built from Chicot City to Collins, and later to Pine Bluff, in 1873, repeated floods forced the Little Rock, Mississippi River, and Texas Railroad to abandon the lines and move north and west away from the Mississippi River flood plain.

The town's namesake, W. B. Dumas, sold a right of way through his property to the railroad in 1867 and surveyed the land, beginning the early settlement of

Dumas. The Little Rock, Mississippi River, and Texas Railroad laid the first line through Dumas in 1870, and it was bought by the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railway later that decade. It is presently the Union Pacific route.

In the Flood of 1927, Dumas was spared for the most part. It was “an island in a sea of floodwaters, with some houses on the north side of town having deep water lapping at their doorsteps, and some of them with water up to the lower floors.” The long-term success of the railroad in Dumas can be attributed to what happened—or didn’t happen—in the Flood of 1927. Although the majority of Desha County was devastated by the floods that year, Dumas escaped extensive damage, allowing the railroad to stay in operation.

Dumas was incorporated in 1904 and blossomed into an agricultural and commercial center in Desha County because of the determination of its residents. Even in 1890, Goodspeed’s History remarked that “the citizens of Desha County...have accomplished so much in the face of such great obstacles.” For instance, in Dumas, people have had to battle flood waters (a flood in 1916 did impact Dumas), labor in the fields to raise crops, cope with the loss of jobs following the fire at the Georgia-Pacific Mill in 1955, and recover from the tornado damage in February 2007. On top of all this, Dumas residents were progressive enough to diversify their local economy over the years with industries like Dantan Company (sewed ladies sportswear), United Dollar Store (later sold to Dollar General), Puryear Wood Products (subsidiary of Bassett Furniture), Sunbeam Corporation (electric mixers), Southern Catfish Processors, Delta Bottle

Works, and Smith Steel Products, among others. So Dumas was able to transform its primarily agricultural character and introduce industry to its economy.

### **Merchants & Farmers Bank Building**

The Merchants and Farmers Bank Building was constructed in 1913 in the late 19th Century Standard Commercial style with secondary Colonial Revival influences. The building was designed by renowned Arkansas architect Charles Thompson and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 as part of the Charles Thompson thematic nomination.

The Merchants and Farmers Bank serves as the visual anchor of the Dumas Commercial Historic District because it is the most classically designed building in the downtown area. This building highlights Charles Thompson's ability to add stylish elements to a rectangular brick commercial structure at a reasonable cost. The bank has a flat roof with a parapet wall. A stone panel inscribed with the name and date of the building is set in the elevated central panel of the parapet wall. A dentiled cornice wraps around the western and southern elevations. The shallow front porch is accented by a pediment, two Ionic columns, and four brick piers with stone bases and capitals. The windows are stationary.

By the 1870s, most farmers resorted to renting their land to tenants in return for a share of the crop. The tenant families had to supply the labor, equipment, and capital to farm their portion of land. In order to purchase these supplies and pay rent to the landowner, many tenant farmers had to get loans from a bank. The

bank then took a lien on the tenant's share of crops and equipment in order to guarantee repayment of the loan.

Merchants and Farmers banks emerged throughout the Arkansas Delta to take advantage of the profitability of the tenant farming system. The Merchants and Farmers Bank was chartered in 1909 to replace the failing Bank of Dumas. In 1913, the old Bank of Dumas building was torn down and the current Merchants and Farmers Bank Building was constructed on the same site as the former bank. Merchants and Farmers Bank is the oldest commercial bank in Desha County.

The building now houses the Dumas Chamber of Commerce. The Main Street Dumas Program was recently awarded a \$23,000 grant from the Department of Arkansas Heritage for the repair/stabilization of the building's cornice, removal of the front awning, and replacement of the front door.

The first Sanborn fire insurance maps of Dumas from 1913 show that there was a general merchandise store on this location but the bank shows up on 1918 maps so it must have been built after the map was published.

**Meador Pharmacy (Non-Contributing to District—not included in boundary, but significant to history of downtown Dumas)**

W. B. Meador came to Dumas in 1887, and his sons, Clifton "Rock" Meador and Bowles Meador, opened Meador Pharmacy in 1917. Electricity was first turned on in Dumas on the same day that Meador Pharmacy opened its doors—July 4,

1917. In those days, the electricity only stayed on from noon until midnight. Bowles was the pharmacist, and Rock was the businessman.

Meador Pharmacy has been a popular gathering place in Dumas since the early days, and the soda fountain is still open. Meador Pharmacy sold a variety of things over the years from animal skins to hunting dogs to gas and tires. Because Rock Meador was a Justice of the Peace, Meador Pharmacy provided marriage licenses and a wedding ceremony for a dollar. Rock Meador performed his 1,000th wedding ceremony in 1969.

The pharmacy even made flower arrangements until a florist opened up in Dumas. One of the Meador's traditions was a five cent cup of coffee with a scoop of ice cream in it. The Meador brothers sold the business to Charles Rector and Bill Canada in 1967, and Canada and his daughter bought Rector's interest in the business in 1995. Meador Pharmacy is the oldest continuous business in Dumas.

Main Street Dumas received a slipcover grant for \$15,000 from Main Street Arkansas this year (FY2008) to remove the aluminum façade from Meador Pharmacy. When they removed the façade, they discovered another ghost sign with an advertisement for "Fortune Ice Cream." It was on the east side of the building, but it has been painted over. "Slipcover" grants help finance removal of false façades from historic Main Street Arkansas buildings. The grants are available to certified local Main Street Arkansas programs to assist in returning downtown buildings to their historic appearance.

This is an example of the evolving personalities of commercial buildings. Meador Pharmacy had a metal slipcover, which was probably a 1970s or 1980s alteration. When it was removed the front façade had modern brick covering the front. So that change as well as the aluminum doors and windows had been installed, probably 1960s, then the slipcover went on.

So as architectural styles changed, the building went through this evolution.

Slipcovers and mansards are both external elements that are put in front of the building façade. Usually slipcovers are placed in front of the upper wall or the upper floors of the building, with the storefront being visible on the first floor. Mansards are primarily applied to the storefront transom area as a form of rigid straight-slope awning; however, sometimes they also cover part of the upper floor.

Both slipcovers and mansards were efforts to update the building style to reflect new design trends. Both frequently obscured the original or historic building façade and are now seen as elements that may need to be removed to reveal the earlier building façade.

Waterman Street is named after the first mayor of Dumas, Gus Waterman. Waterman was a Jewish immigrant from Germany and owned a mercantile business in Dumas. His younger son, Julian Waterman, was the first dean of the University of Arkansas School of Law. The law school building on the UA campus in Fayetteville is named after him.



## **Banks Building or Adams Building**

The Banks Building or Adams Building was built around 1920 by Samuel Alexander Banks to house his general store business, S. A. Banks and Company. The building was constructed in the early 20th Century Standard Commercial style and features a brick cornice with dentils along its front façade. Four air vents are arranged in the bricks below the dentils. The roof is flat with a parapet wall in front.

If you notice the configuration of the windows, you see that they're stepped and graduated toward the door. This was a device used in commercial buildings to entice customers into the store. Display windows were often flush with the building until they figured out if you provided more window space you could exhibit more goods and if the windows narrowed toward the doors, customers would be drawn in to actually buy.

The building has been renovated, and the original pressed tin ceiling has been refurbished. As workers were removing the old plaster from the interior walls of the building, they discovered a painted advertisement on the north wall. It is for H. M. Fish & Son and Dr. Tichenor's Antiseptic.

The Banks Building is also referred to as the Adams Building because Bud Adams ran a general store out of the building for more than 40 years. In 1931, Bud Adams was attending the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville when his father

called him to come home. Bud's uncle, Clifton Adams, had been killed while trying to cross the railroad tracks. Clifton owned part of Adams Mercantile Co., and Bud's father had bought his half and wanted Bud and his brother Tony to run it.

A favorite snack at Adams Mercantile consisted of summer sausage, cheese, and saltine crackers. Everyone came to town on Saturdays to do their shopping, socialize, and see the "picture show." Oftentimes, people would leave their groceries in Adams Mercantile while they went to the Gem Theatre, so the store didn't close until after midnight when they came back to pick them up. The building is now home to the Daughters of Charity (Catholic mission work).

On the 1913 Sanborn maps there was a saloon on the site. By 1918 it was a general merchandise.

### **First Porter Building**

David Oscar Porter moved to Dumas in 1893 after having managed plantations near Arkansas Post, South Bend, and Arkansas City. Between 1905 and 1938, Porter built five of the buildings on the east side of Main Street, three of which contribute to the historic district.

This is one of the three contributing Porter Buildings. This one was constructed around 1905 and is the oldest building in the historic district. The Porter Building is constructed in the early 20th Century Standard Commercial style with a flat

roof. There are two distinct storefronts but its considered one building within the district.

You can see a step on this segment – In 2001 there was a centered wooden door flanked by display windows topped with infilled transoms. Since then the windows and doors have been replaced.

The second segment had the stepped display windows you see today but they were larger. There were infilled transom windows, which are covered by the current awning. If you see the little holes above the awning in the brick that was a projecting tin cornice with brackets, which has been removed since 2001. This building currently houses part of Gill Furniture.

The wooden awning covering is recent but Historic photos of traditional 19th and 20th century downtowns show that commercial buildings had these type of awnings frequently, either of wood, metal or cloth. The wooden awnings were usually flat because of the presence of transom windows – they would not have been angled like they are today. Of course being likely to deteriorate quickly awnings got changed out quite a bit.

Both of these storefronts had flat metal awnings suspended by cables in 2001.

D. W. Gill, Jr., bought the Goodyear Tire Store from Bob Hagood in 1948, and renamed it Gill Tire Store. In 1965, the store was moved across the tracks to the Matthews Co. Building, where lines of appliances and furniture were added. This

building burned in 1978, and is now the site of the Billy Free Memorial Park. The Gills then moved their store back to the east side of Main Street to the Porter Building, where it expanded. Danny Gill took over operation of the store in the 1980s.

### **Second Porter Building**

The one-story Porter Building at 153 Main was constructed around 1925, and it is also built in the early 20th Century Standard Commercial style. The building has a flat roof with a stepped parapet bearing the Porter name engraved in stone. There is a simple brick cornice running parallel to the roofline and classical details in the limestone diamond shapes. It was noted in 2008 that there were transom windows, which are likely under the awning.

This area of Main Street in 1913 was mostly vacant lots. There was a small grocery store and sewing machine business roughly in this area. Farther down on this side was a restaurant and meat business.

It was still sparsely developed in 1918. In 1928 there was a small filling station directly in front of this building.

### **Third Porter Building**

The two-story Porter Building is the largest structure on the east side of Main Street and was also built around 1925 by D. O. Porter. Porter operated one of

the five saloons that were on Main Street, and he ran a mercantile business out of this building. The Porter Store was in operation until the 1970s.

During World War II, the top story of this building was a sewing factory for military uniforms. This building is another good example of early 20th Century Standard Commercial architecture and has a flat roof with a parapet. "Porter" is engraved in stone on the parapet wall.

A brick cornice runs parallel to the roofline. The building has 9 symmetrically arranged windows with arched brick lintels on its upper story. The original windows have been removed and replaced with wood infill and two-over-two aluminum windows. It originally had double-hung wooden windows with two-over-two sashes.

The first story display windows have been enclosed and where Aint that Funky is there was a double-door recessed between plate glass display windows. In 2001 photos there were transoms covered by metal, which are now probably under the awning.

The right storefront had a single door and flush display windows, which has been infilled and now features two doors. The awning on this building was originally placed under the transoms. It was flat and suspended by cables.

This was the area of the 1913 grocery and restaurant.

**Buck's Liquor (Non-Contributing)**

This building is noncontributing because of the metal covering above the entrance and because one of the display windows has been enclosed.

In 1913 in about this area the storefronts shown on the Sanborn map angled toward the street from the two-story Porter Building, which is the case now, but it's not really noticeable until you stand right in front of them.

**Hagood Building**

The Hagood Building was constructed in 1938 by D. O. Porter. Like most of the other buildings in the district, the Hagood Building was constructed in the early 20th Century Standard Commercial style. It is a brick building with a flat roof and a parapet. There are three sections to this building separated by brick pilasters capped with limestone.

The southern-most section has the name Porter and the construction date of 1938 engraved in a namestone, while the northern-most section has the name Hagood and the construction date noted in a namestone. The three sections appear to be separate buildings because they have housed different businesses, but it is one structure like the previous Porter Buildings. The Hagood Building was built as a rental property, and it has housed many merchants over the years, including a barber shop and furniture stores.

The flush display windows were boarded over until recently when the Sonflower Bakery and Porter Place Event Center were installed.

In 1913 there were three separate buildings on this site; they weren't joined like they are now. They included groceries and general merchandise businesses.

In 1918 they included millineries and confectionaries

### **Dante's Department Store (Pronounced "Dan--tee")**

Dante's Department Store was built around 1925 to house the expanding operations of Charles Dante's Globe Store. The store slogan was painted on the front exterior and is still visible—"You furnish the girl, we furnish the home." Another slogan reads "Furniture on Easy Terms." You can clearly see the advertisement on the building's north side, "Dante's Department Store—Serving Dumas Since 1897" and on the north side of the building you can see more exterior advertising.

Charles Dante, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, moved to Dumas in 1894. He was a peddler, but by 1897, he had saved enough money to open a store. He enlarged his business, naming it The Globe Store, and by 1925, he moved his operations to this location. Charles Dante was a very capable businessman and invested in land, cotton, and the public ginning of cotton. Dante partnered with Frank Lee, Samuel Banks, and the Cox brothers to buy a cotton gin from the Williams family in 1910, and Dante later bought out his partners. His son and later his grandson joined him in the family business, and his grandson (Charles

Herrman Dante) became a well-known leader in the Mid-South cotton industry. Prior to his death, Charles H. Dante helped to establish the Dumas Cotton Gin, which was the most efficient and technologically advanced cotton gin in the nation at the time of its opening.

Bernard Jerome Tanenbaum, who married Charles Dante's daughter, Naomi, founded United Dollar Stores at the site of Dante's Department Store in 1957. This venture grew into 242 stores operating in seven states, and overseas in Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. The entire operation was controlled from the office and warehouse in Dumas. Tanenbaum sold the company to Dollar General Corporation in 1977. The Dumas Area Arts Center and Phoenix Youth occupy the department store building now.

In 1913 there was a single general merchandise store on the corner of Choctaw and Main. In 1918 a small addition had been built to the side of the store. The 1925 Sanborn map showed the general merchandise store on this corner and a 30-car capacity garage adjacent. So that must have been done right before the Dante's store was built.

### **Nickel Grocery Building**

The Nickel Grocery Building was built around 1925 and is designed in the early 20th Century Standard Commercial style. It has a flat roof with a parapet and stationary glass windows. This building was a grocery store owned by the Nickel



brothers. There was another segment to the store, which is where you see the concrete foundation now.

In photos from 2001 there were transoms, which are probably again under the awning.

In 1913 and 1918 there weren't any buildings on this site.

### **A New Look Barber and Stylist (Non-Contributing)**

You can see the foundation for the other half of the Nickel Grocery Building.

### **Billy Free Memorial Park (Non-Contributing)**

There were two buildings where the park is now—the Matthews Co. Building and the Mary Bowles Store Building, which was a general store. Both of these buildings were destroyed by fire.

In this general area in 1913 there was a pool hall and confectionary and a barber as well as an airdome theater.

Ralph Wilcox of AhPP National Register wrote a paper on the airdome theater, which I can get copies of if you want to see it but the airdome was an open-air theater and between 1905 and 1933 there were 20 in Arkansas.

Will Locke, an actor who worked in airdomes, described the general layout of an airdome theater in a 1948 article in Billboard magazine. He wrote:

“It was usually located on a choice lot in the heart of the town and was enclosed with a high, board fence. The seating arrangement was chairs and benches and the capacity from 500 to 1,500. Some had a canvas roof that was adjustable to either open air or for protection in case of rain. The stage was permanently roofed and often well equipped with a regular stock of scenery. Dressing rooms were at either side or at the back and all facilities were much the same as found in regular opera houses.”

The earliest one was built in Eureka Springs in 1908. A similar idea to the airdome, the drive-in theater took over by the 1930s in the nation and the airdome was replaced.

In 1918 a more permanent building had replaced the airdome here.

### **McKennon-Shea House (Individually Listed on NR, but not part of district)**

I’m going to mention The McKennon-Shea House at 206 Waterman here because it is connected to the McKennon Building I’m about to tell you about. It was built in 1907 by Robert Culpepper and was purchased by Claude Reeve McKennon in

1913. Today the house remains in the ownership of McKennon's great-grandson, Thomas McKennon Shea and his wife, Debra. The house is a good example of the Folk Victorian architectural style.

The McKennon-Shea House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 for its association with Claude Reeves McKennon, who was an instrumental figure in the development of Dumas. He came to Dumas in the 1890s to work for the Austin Co., which was the first ice business to serve Walnut Lake and Dumas. By 1910, he owned a cotton gin and a growing farming operation. He ultimately had gins in Dumas and Watson as well as farms at Watson, Dumas, and Reedville.

He made headlines throughout the region in 1947 when he sold his cotton crop for \$1 million in New Orleans. Claude McKennon partnered with R.B. Malone and J.H. Davis in 1909 to run the Planter's Gin Company. After moving to San Antonio for one year to ease his son, Joe Lee's, tuberculosis, McKennon returned to Dumas. He and Malone bought out Davis' interest in the gin company and established McKennon Supply Co. in 1910.

After Malone died, McKennon and his son, Joe Lee, changed the company name to C.R. McKennon and Son. Their cotton gin became the largest public gin in the area, and in the 1930s, they opened a farm implement dealership. Thomas Francis Shea, Jr., joined his grandfather and uncle in the implement business, later acquiring full ownership of McKennon Implement Co. His sons, Thomas McKennon Shea and William Warrick Shea, now supervise the family's interests.

**McKennon Building/Wolff Brothers Department Store (Non-Contributing)**

This is The McKennon Building/Wolff Brothers Department Store and it is non-contributing to the historic district because of the metal mansard on the building. However, its history is worthy of mention. The McKennon Building or Wolff Brothers Department Store was built around 1925 by Claude Reeve McKennon.

That same year, Sam Wolff opened Wolff Brothers Department Store in the building. Wolff later bought the building and occupied all three sections of it until 2004, when the store closed. At first, Wolff Brothers only occupied the two-story section of the building, while the Gem Theatre occupied an adjacent 1 and ½ story section, and the Dumas Cash Store occupied the one story section. There were apartments above the 2 story section rented to the Fletcher and Huey families, and Dr. Cook had his office above the (Gem Theatre).

Samuel Wolff, a Jewish immigrant from Romania, came to Dumas in 1925 to open Wolff Brothers Department Store. He and his brothers also had other stores in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. When Sam's youngest son, Haskell (or Hack) Wolff, returned to Dumas in 1945 after serving in the Army during World War II, he took over management duties at the store. Hack Wolff and his wife, Elaine, operated the Dumas landmark until 2004.

After their business, Flowers and Gifts, on Hwy. 165, was destroyed in the 2007 tornado, William and Ann Gamble decided to purchase the vacant Wolff Brothers

Building and renovate it for their new location. They did keep the original pressed tin ceiling in one portion of the building.

### **Wolff Brothers Warehouse (Non-Contributing)**

This is the one story section. Before this building was used as the warehouse for Wolff Brothers Department Store, it was the Gem Theatre, which was open until the 1960s.

On the 1913 Sanborn maps there was a general merchandise store on the corner lot.

In 1918 an auto garage was built to the north of the corner building. The 1925 Sanborn shows a store on the first floor and a hospital on the second floor of this corner building and the movie theater first appeared with a store connected to the other side.