



**Historic Downtown El Dorado
Walks Through History Tour
Saturday, December 9, 2017**

Hello, my name is Amy Milliken and I'd like to thank you for joining us on the Walks Through History Tour of Historic Downtown El Dorado. A couple of things I need to tell you before we get started...

First, the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program is a Registered Provider with The American Institute of Architects Continuing Education Systems and this session is registered with the AIA for continuing education credit. Credit earned for completion of this program will be reported to AIA Records for AIA members. If you are here today and want your AIA credit, please see me after the tour. *(constituents wanting AIA credit must send me an email with their name, contact information and AIA number included in the message)*

Second, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Rachel Silva, Shelle Stormoe, Ralph Wilcox and countless others for the information I will be passing on to you today. I am AHPP's Education Outreach Coordinator and I usually work with 3rd to 12th grade students in schools around the state. Therefore, I was only

able to pull this tour script together with the help of the many historians at AHPP. With that being said, let's begin...

History of El Dorado

El Dorado, nicknamed the "oil capital of Arkansas" and the "City of Gold," is the largest city in south central Arkansas. Though its reputation and fame are linked to the discovery of oil in the area in the 1920s, the city's history began long before that.

According to local folklore, El Dorado as we know it was founded around 1830 by Virginia-born Matthew F. Rainey whose wagon broke down in the area. Unable to travel any further, Rainey was forced to sell his goods on the spot. It is said that Rainey was so impressed by the local farmers' eagerness to buy that he sent for more goods and opened a store. Rainey is generally regarded as El Dorado's first citizen and businessman. However, El Dorado was formally founded in 1843 when Rainey's property was chosen for a more centrally located county seat and he deeded 160 acres of his land to Union County for this purpose (previous county seats had been at Camden and Champagnolle). Rainey kept four acres where his cabin stood knowing that the development of the town would be good for his business.

[The site was chosen for several reasons. It was centrally located and it was located on the east-west trail between Arkansas Post and Texarkana and the north-south route between central Arkansas and Louisiana, and probably most importantly was the site's proximity to the Ouachita River, which at that time was the major regional transportation artery.]

[The exact origin of the name "El Dorado" ("the gilded road" in Spanish) is not certain. Some say that three county commissioners picked the name. Others say that it came from a slang expression addressed to passing wagon trains as they journeyed west, "Where are you going? To your El Dorado?" Still others suggest that Matthew Rainey and a Judge Davis named the city and christened it with a bottle of whiskey from Rainey's store.]

Before the discovery of oil, timber was the county's most plentiful resource. The most important event in El Dorado in the late 1800s was the arrival of the railroad in 1891. This made it easier for people to ship timber to larger markets in Memphis, St. Louis, and New Orleans. The arrival of the railroad allowed the town to prosper, but nothing could have prepared El Dorado for what was to come.

In the early years of the twentieth century, before the oil boom, El Dorado was described in a publication entitled "El Dorado and Her Advantages" as a town with a bustling commercial center and sound moral character. The publication stated, "There are no saloons to entice the young man from his studies, no dancing halls to divert the minds of young ladies from their work, no gambling dens to corrupt the morals of the boys. The moral and religious tone of the town is healthy....we have a good town full of good people, good churches, good business advantages, and a good school."

Up until 1921 the arrival of the railroad had marked the greatest growth of the city but with the discovery of oil two miles south of town, El Dorado would see a period of immense growth and immediate change that would leave the peaceful town forever changed.

[Dr. Samuel T. Busey (a doctor turned geologist) financed an oil well about 2 miles west of town in 1920 with a group of other businessmen. On Monday, January 10, 1921, the Busey No. 1 Well was drilled to a depth of 2,233 feet and struck oil. The oil sprayed the area for more than a mile around, causing laundry on nearby clotheslines to drip with oil. Within 48 hours, the oil boom was on...People rushed to El Dorado to make quick money off the oil discovery. Unscheduled trains began to arrive in town carrying passengers who hurried off and disappeared into the town to seek their fortune. Twenty-two trains a day were soon running in and out of El Dorado and within six days of the discovery of oil at the Busey Well, an air service was established between El Dorado and Shreveport, Louisiana. Hotels were filled, and desperate people rented barber chairs for \$2 a night or had to sleep in the Presbyterian Cemetery (south of square). Tents and shacks sprang up overnight throughout the city, and crime became a problem.]

One account described the boom as follows, "...the streets...of the town were thronged with a seething mass of conglomerate humanity...diamonds and costly furs rubbed elbows with oil-spotted khaki..."

El Dorado 's civic and political leaders were at a loss as to how to handle the situation at first, but eventually dealt with most of the problems that confronted them in this expansion period.

[In just four years, El Dorado changed from a sleepy town with 4 paved roads to a bustling city. The population of El Dorado was just under 4,000 people in 1920, and by 1925, there were 30,000 people here--that's more than 7 times the population in 1920!! [2010 pop. was 18,884] In 1923 El Dorado had 63 restaurants, 23 doctors, 32 hotels, 48 law firms, 59 oil companies, 13 independent oil investors, 13 oil operators and 22 oil production companies. Also listed in the 1923 City Directory were 84 groceries and countless boarding houses. By 1925 the population of El Dorado was recorded at over 30,000. From Jan. 1921-1923 the city issued \$2.5 Million in building permits.]

El Dorado 's economy faltered only briefly during the Great Depression of the 1930s and many men moved on to east Texas where oil had been discovered. Unlike much of the nation, El Dorado's economy was largely stable through the 1930s with most industries such as oil refineries, gasoline plants, cottons gins, bottling works and others remaining open.

The 1940s were marked by industrial growth in El Dorado, notably the expansion of both the Root Petroleum and the Lion Oil Company refineries. Construction of headquarters for the Murphy Oil began in 1950 and an annex to the building constructed in 1964.

The economic base of El Dorado still relies on oil, timber and poultry production and chemical plants have added to the area's economic stability. The city's boundaries continue to expand. The downtown business district has experienced a massive renaissance with numerous restorations and renovations of the historic buildings. Occupancy rates in El Dorado's commercial core are high and the downtown remains an active center of government and commerce.

The historic commercial district in downtown El Dorado remains an intact ensemble of early twentieth century commercial buildings. Architectural styles such as Classical Revival and Art Deco highlight this collection of vernacular commercial buildings.

Today we are going to take a look at some of the buildings in this beautiful downtown. FYI, the original town consisted of 49 lots; of these, 24 were around the courthouse square. Many of the buildings we will see today reflect the prosperity of the oil boom era.

Bank of Commerce (Gibraltar Energy)

This bank was built in 1919 and served the town before the oil boom. This structure served as a bank building until 1973. It was restored to its 1920 appearance in 1979. The Interior has been adaptively reused to provide contemporary office space. The structure boasts AHPP approved exterior restoration and interior rehabilitation. The building represents a sophisticated example of classically derived architectural styles dominant in AR architecture in the early twentieth century. Decorative detail and the distinctive temple front reflect the impact of neoclassicism and renaissance revivalism. Looking at this building from the pre-boom period, it is easy to see how the boom effected the built environment of the town.

The bank's capital rose from a little over \$800,000 in 1921 to around \$3 million by 1923 and unlike many banks around the nation, this bank remained stable during the Depression.

This building is dominated by its temple front, which gives it its classification as a Classical Revival building.

The beautiful brickwork is laid in a Flemish bond pattern.

This building was one of the first restoration projects in downtown El Dorado.

Exchange Bank (Lion Oil Building)

The Exchange Bank Building was built in 1927 and like the courthouse is an architectural design of Mann and Stern. It is possible that they were working on this building and the courthouse at same time. The firm was known for blending

exotic revivals with the neoclassical style in the design of commercial buildings. It was built to hold one of El Dorado's largest banks and also as the corporate headquarters of Lion Oil Co.

The Exchange Bank was established in 1924. It was organized by Col. T.H. Barton who would eventually be president of Lion Oil and one of the state's first millionaires, along with Ike Felsentahl and G.W. Jones.

Like the courthouse, the building was constructed using limestone. It features classical elements in the form of arched entrances and arched eighth floor windows. The arch detailing at the top gives a hint of gothic revival or perhaps even more of a Moorish feel.

This building instantly became an architectural landmark in Arkansas, and helped set El Dorado's modern image.

Union County Courthouse

The Union County Courthouse was designed in 1927-28 by George R. Mann and Eugene John Stern in the Classical Revival style. In addition to this courthouse, the firm is credited with designing the Arlington Hotel in Hot Springs, North Little Rock High School, and the Little Rock Masonic Temple. Mann was also part of the design team for Central High School and probably most noteworthy the Arkansas State Capitol.

The Union County Courthouse was built to handle the increased volume of deed and title transactions that came about as a result of the oil boom. It replaced a brick courthouse built here in 1901 but that was not the first county courthouse. The first courthouse was built in 1844 just across the street and I will show you the marker once we cross over towards Oak Street. It was built at a cost of \$200 and the construction contract called for only a roof and four walls. Although the oil boom created the need for a new courthouse, the increased county tax intake is what made construction of such an impressive building possible. Although I do not know the final cost of the building, the quorum court allocated \$750,000 for the project.

The courthouse exterior features four colonnaded facades of smooth limestone. There are 14 Ionic columns on both the east and west sides and 6 Ionic columns on both the north and south sides. Notice the decorative medallions bearing the scales of justice and lanterns of light. Also notice the terra cotta parapet with acanthus decoration (acanthus leaves—common plant in the Mediterranean—were used extensively in the Classical architecture of ancient Greece and Rome) and the fourth floor windows covered with decorative grilles—this is because the city jail used to be on the fourth floor.

Although we can't see for ourselves today, I can tell you a little about the interior of the building. The focal point of the courthouse interior is the two-story atrium with second floor gallery. The floors and staircases are marble as are the square columns with Corinthian capitals.

Second floor courtroom: This is the largest of 3 courtrooms in the courthouse. Has an ornate plaster coffered ceiling with gilded rosettes, walnut wainscoting, and plaster walls textured to resemble stone blocks. Also walnut paneling behind the judge's bench and paneled metal doors topped by decorative bronze grilles.

Jail was located on 4th floor. Apart from the usual prisoner cells, the jail had its own kitchen and a 2-bedroom apartment for the Deputy Sheriff-Jailer and his family. The rear elevator that was used to take prisoners up from the Sheriff's office to the fourth floor jail is still there (and still functions!). In fact, a bullet hole still remains in the elevator from an incident that took place about 1940. A prisoner got the deputy sheriff's gun out of its holster while the two men were riding in the elevator and shot him.

The only obvious change I see to the exterior of the building are the metal replacement windows. Except for the terra cotta parapet, medallions and lanterns, the building has very little ornamentation on the exterior.

El Dorado Confederate Monument: Memorial to Confederate soldiers erected in 1909 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Although no battles were fought in El Dorado or Union County during the Civil War, records indicate 1500 men volunteered for the Confederate cause, two-thirds of which never returned.

Like many of the downtown buildings, the monument features classical design elements.

It was erected in 1909 by the Daughters of the Confederacy. The monument cost over \$2800 to create and although monuments to the confederacy are found throughout the south, this was thought to be the first designed as a memorial fountain in the south.

Masonic Temple (West side of courthouse square)

First, let me say the lodge has a rich history and is one of the oldest charters in the state. El Dorado Lodge No. 13, Free & Accepted Masons was granted a charter from the Grand Lodge of the State on November 7, 1846. Lodge No. 13 initially met in the first log courthouse on the northwest corner of the public square before holding meetings in commercial buildings around the square (2 locations on the north block of the square and 1 location on the east block). The Lodge acquired the Johnsten Opera House building on this site about 1912. However, the two-story brick building burned in 1922, and the Masonic Temple was completed in 1924 at the cost of \$90,000. It was designed by architect Charles S. Watts, who was affiliated for a short time with the firm of Wittenberg, Delony & Watts of Little Rock. It is one of Arkansas's few known examples of the Art Deco influenced Egyptian Revival style of architecture.

The building exhibits Art Deco detailing in its smooth limestone façade, vertical emphasis provided by pilasters, and panels with cross-hatching. Also notice the Masons' traditional carpenter's square and compass symbol with the letter "G" in the center, meaning God. The spread wings represent the expanded wings of the cherubim on the top of the Ark of the Covenant.

Again, we cannot enter the building but I can tell you a little about the interior. The Masonic Lodge owns the entire building, but they rent out two spaces on the lower level. The lower levels have been altered with false wood paneling and drop ceilings. The most elaborate part of the Masonic Temple is the third floor lodge room. The room's Egyptian-inspired design was originally done by local interior decorator Paul Gideon, and the decorations were retouched in the early 1970s. Murals on the wall depicting various Biblical scenes were painted by Thomas G. Moses of Chicago. You'll see many familiar Masonic symbols like the letter "G", extended wings, square and compass (note original light fixtures with symbols), etc.

Egyptian Revival elements include the papyrus-inspired columns with bands of painted symbols, lotus flower designs, sphinxes on either side of the stage, life-size Egyptian guard statues, and walls tiled to resemble stone like a tomb (a la King Tut's tomb—discovered in 1922).

[Masonry is based on the building of Solomon's Temple, and that's where the Egyptian-inspired design comes from—even though Solomon's temple wasn't in Egypt. Also—Egyptians were some of the earliest stone masons, so that could explain the significance of the room's décor. The Masonic rituals and beliefs probably played a role in the choice of the Egyptian architectural and decorative vocabulary. But a bigger factor was the recent discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon. The discovery of the untouched tomb of the young pharaoh was a major influence on the fashion, architecture, and interior design of the Roaring 20s. The combination of the recently popular Art Deco style with the Egyptian in the Masonic Temple is evidence to the newly found wealth and power.]

The interior of this building is spectacular. If you ever get a chance to go inside the building, I would encourage you to do so.

One week before this building was formally opened on April 1st, 1924, the local paper bragged that it was, "undoubtedly the finest Blue Lodge Masonic Temple in the United States."

Rialto Theater (SW corner Jefferson & Cedar)

The Rialto was completed in September 1929 and is one of the best examples of a historic movie theater in the state. At the time of its opening, the building was being advertised as fire-proof and one of the most modern theaters in the South. The Grand Opening of the theater was a black-tie affair and all the wealthy citizens attended. The theater seated 900 on the floor level and 200 in the balcony.

During El Dorado's boom period, there were as many as five movie theaters operating in downtown. This was undoubtedly the finest.

The building was designed by the local architectural firm of Kolben, Hunter and Boyd and served as the flagship of the Clark-McWilliams Theater Company. While the Rialto was being built, the partners were able to acquire all of El Dorado's theaters, giving them control of the local market.

The building cost around \$250,000, which was a lot for a building of this size at that time. There were only 2 buildings in the region that rivaled the luxury and comfort of this theater. One was the Saengar Theater in Pine Bluff and the other was the Singer theater in Texarkana, now known as the Perot Theater, both of which had construction costs of around \$180,000.

The Rialto even featured an early form of air conditioning and air filtration. It was one of the first theaters in Arkansas designed specifically for talking pictures. They spent over \$13,000 in acoustical equipment alone.

The signage used over 1,500 light bulbs to draw attention to this already eye-catching building.

The high style of the theater does a tremendous job of conveying the cosmopolitan atmosphere of El Dorado during the 1920s.

Haunted Rialto...There is supposedly a female ghost who resides in the Rialto. Her name is Penelope. Some people have seen Penelope--she is a young woman who wears laced boots, a long dress, and a hat with a veil. Some people don't see

her—they just smell a sweet perfume, as if she had just walked past them. Many years ago, a man brought Penelope to the Rialto to watch a show. In the theater, he proposed marriage, and the woman happily accepted. However, the man soon fell in love with a beautiful actress who was performing in a live show at the Rialto. The man broke off his engagement, and the jilted woman died of a broken heart. She still roams the Rialto, looking for her lost love.

Over the years, people who work in the projection booth have reported **smelling a sweet perfume and hearing footsteps climbing the stairs**. But when they opened the projection room door, no one was there.

A psychic named Carol Pate came to the Rialto, and the first ghost she saw was a heavysset man upstairs. She stated that she “got the feeling that he owned the place—like a caretaker.” He wore a vest with a pocket watch. In fact, a former theater manager fit that description. Carol Pate also saw a little boy named Charlie that roamed the lobby. After his father died in an oil rig explosion, Charlie came to the Rialto because it made him happy...and stayed.

Another frequently experienced “hot spot” is the upstairs women’s bathroom. Many people have seen a girl dressed in 1920s attire leaving the bathroom—she walks to the mirror across from the bathroom entrance, looks in, and then returns to the bathroom. This happens over and over again.

Griffin Auto Company Building (at Locust & Jefferson—behind Rialto)

In 1915, as the popularity of the automobile increased, the Griffin Brothers decided to branch out into the automobile business and became a franchise of the Ford Motor Company. The Griffin Auto Company Building was built in 1928 by the Griffin brothers—William, Tom, and Carl—who had started out in the livery business in El Dorado in the early 1900s. This new type of building layout solved the problems of selling and servicing automobiles. It sold cars, had a filling station, and operated a repair shop. It is the best example of a building designed as a full-service car dealership in the city of El Dorado. The old Griffin stable and

riding pen was located to the east of this building until the 1940s. Griffin Auto Co. moved out of the building in the early 1960s. Since that time the building has been used as a builder's supply, boat dealership and a glass company.

[Instead of re-securing the Ford franchise, the brothers chose to contract with Buick Motor Company. In 1931, they kept the contract with Buick and added Chevrolet. They also secured many other lines of automobile products, and increased their business hours until they could boast: "The Griffin Auto Company now stands ready at all times to serve the needs of the motoring public through any of its number departments with courteous attendants, factory trained mechanics, and the will to serve as its creed."

The business also included an 8,000 square feet lot to the east of the main building which was used as a used car lot, and also a horse stable and riding pen. The stable and pen were used to sell, trade and buy horses.]

First United Methodist Church (corner of Hill & Cedar)

The sanctuary of the First United Methodist Church was completed in 1924—again, as a result of the oil boom. It was designed in the Classical Revival style with a monumental front entrance featuring a triangular pediment supported by 6 Ionic columns and a projecting cornice with dentils. The first story fenestrations also feature triangular and segmental arch pediments. The chapel and education annex (south of sanctuary) were constructed in 1957 to accommodate the growing congregation. Both the sanctuary and the education annex were designed by Herbert Voelckler of Houston, TX.

The interior of the sanctuary is largely original with walnut paneling, stained glass windows, original pews, and a coffered ceiling with original fixtures. However, the church interior was slightly remodeled in 1972—opening for organ used to be arched instead of square, and the screen covering the pipe organ was removed. The original 1924 pipe organ was replaced in 1982.

El Dorado's first church building was constructed in late 1845 by the Methodist congregation. It was a log building located on this site. The land for the church and adjoining cemetery was donated by founding church member, Warner Brown.

A wood-frame structure was built in 1871 at the corner of Jackson & Locust, and a brick Gothic Revival-style church was constructed in 1902 at Jackson & Cedar, facing north. However, the oil boom in 1921 necessitated the construction of a new church, and the current sanctuary was completed in 1924.

Warner Brown Cemetery: Warner Brown donated this land and the land where the education annex is located in 1845 for use as a cemetery. When the education annex was constructed in the 1950s, some graves were relocated within the cemetery, and an agreement was made for the church to maintain the cemetery and erect a monument to the memory of Warner Brown. The first burial was that of Warner Brown's wife, Matilda, who died in 1845. The last person to be buried here was Lucy Anne Moore Gresham, who died in 1938. This cemetery not only contains the graves of some of El Dorado's pioneer citizens, the markers are good examples of 19th and early 20th century funerary art (lambs, doves, drapes, obelisks, urns, fingers pointing upward, clasped hands, etc.). The cemetery fence was erected in 1916 by Paul Brown in memory of his father, Warner Brown.

First Presbyterian Church (300 E. Main)

The First Presbyterian Church is unique among the downtown churches because it is the only one designed in the Collegiate Gothic style. The building was designed by the architectural firm of R. H. Hunt and Associates, and the sanctuary and two-story educational wing were finished in October 1926. The church is constructed out of red brick and white terra cotta, and it originally had a green tile roof (which was replaced with synthetic shingles in the early 1960s). The smaller chapel to the east of the sanctuary was designed to blend with the architecture of the existing structure and was completed in 1964.

The church exhibits several characteristics of the Collegiate Gothic style—pointed arch stained glass windows with tracery, a recessed entrance, a parapet, and a steeply pitched roof. The other notable feature of the exterior is the bell tower with pointed arch windows and terra cotta spires.

The First Presbyterian Church of El Dorado was founded in 1846 by Rev. W. S. Lacy, and a small church building was constructed just across the street from the Presbyterian Cemetery on S. Washington Ave. (thus the name of the cemetery). The church was dissolved during the Civil War, and at the suggestion of the Presbytery, the church bell was donated to the Confederate Government to be melted down and molded into cannon balls. The church was reorganized in 1868 and a new building constructed just to the west of the present church in 1872. Then a new wood-frame, Gothic Revival-style church was built on the southeast corner of this block in 1897 because a hotel had been built right up against the west side of the previous church. But the 4th and current church was constructed from 1924 to 1926 to accommodate the growing congregation during the oil boom years. A building fund campaign was initiated in January of 1924, and \$104,000 was pledged within four days. This building was completed in October, 1926 and the Women's Auxiliary raised the money for a pipe organ, which was installed at a cost of \$20,000. To recognize the new building's prominence, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States held their annual meeting in El Dorado in 1927. There have been some additions and the roof was originally covered in green terracotta tile, but overall the building is still an excellent representation of the Collegiate Gothic style.

Interesting fact: The Presbyterian Cemetery I mentioned earlier is still on South Washington Ave. and has several of El Dorado's pioneer citizens buried there, including Matthew Rainey.