

Walks through History
Fordyce-Ricks House Historic District, Hot Springs
April 17, 2010
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Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the April Walks through History tour of the Fordyce-Ricks House Historic District. Before we get started, I want to introduce and thank Nancy June Ricks Bryant and Tab Bryant for allowing us to tour the property, and many thanks to the people at the Garland County Historical Society for their help as well. The district was listed on the National Register in 2003 for its association with Colonel Samuel W. Fordyce and Major General Earl T. Ricks, and because it is the best example of the Rustic style of architecture in Hot Springs.

Hot Springs History

LA PURCHASE

In 1803, the U.S. purchased over 800,000 square miles west of the MS River from France, resulting in the largest land purchase in U.S. history. President Thomas Jefferson wanted to know more about this new land America had just purchased. We had no idea what kinds of animals, plants, and people lived in this vast area. It was completely unknown to us what we had just bought—there were wild tales of blue-eyed natives and great beasts that roamed the country.

HUNTER-DUNBAR

President Thomas Jefferson wanted to find out about our newly acquired land, so he commissioned several expeditions. The Hunter-Dunbar expedition was to explore the Southern tributaries of the Mississippi River, but Jefferson specifically wanted them to journey to Hot Springs and report on the Native population and the nature of the springs. The expedition camped in the Hot Springs area from Dec 9, 1804, to Jan 8, 1805.

Dunbar reported to President Jefferson: “The hot springs themselves are indeed a great curiosity; the temperature of their waters is from 130-150 degrees...we were unable to keep the finger a moment in the water as it issued from the rock.”

HOT SPRINGS

Geological phenomenon: Rain water soaks into the soil and rock—as it descends through the earth’s crust, it dissolves calcium carbonate, iron oxides, and other minerals. Then after a long journey, which can last up to 4,000 years, heat from the Earth’s interior forces the water back up through cracks in the crust—and there happens to be several large cracks in the Earth’s crust on Hot Springs Mountain. Water is rich in minerals when it emerges b/c it soaks them up as it travels down through the Earth’s crust.

PIONEERS

The first permanent white settlers came to Hot Springs around 1807. Pioneers heard the stories of the healing springs and believed in their curative powers. By the mid-1800s, people began coming from all over the country to visit the springs. They arrived by stagecoach and later, train.

TRAIN & STAGE

You see, the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern RR came through Rockport (near Malvern) twenty miles east of Hot Springs in the early 1870s. So people had to take the train to Malvern and board a stagecoach for the remainder of the trip to Hot Springs. It was an extremely rough and rocky ride!

DIAMOND JO

However, in 1874, a wealthy Yankee named Joseph or “Diamond Jo” Reynolds came to Hot Springs seeking a cure for his rheumatism. The rough ride in the stagecoach from Malvern to H.S. angered and inconvenienced him, so he decided to construct a narrow gauge railroad line from Malvern to H.S. with his own money (he was on the same level as the Vanderbilts, Carnegies, and Rockefellers).

RESERVATION

The US government believed it was important to preserve the springs and wanted to prevent commercial exploitation of the area, so Hot Springs was named a “National Reservation” in 1832. This was the first time the federal gov’t chose to preserve land for recreational purposes. Hot Springs Reservation later became a National park in 1921 (the NPS was created in 1916). **Technically, HSNP is America’s oldest national park--40 years older than Yellowstone (est. 1872).**

SAM FORDYCE ARRIVES

Fast forward to 1876. The Hot Springs Reservation was “nothing more than an oversized village” of about 1,500 people. The bathhouses at that time were wood-frame structures and very utilitarian in nature—definitely not the showplaces you see on Bathhouse Row today. Hot Springs Creek flowed freely through the middle of downtown (along Central Ave.), eventually creating an open sewer. By this point in time, several private citizens claimed portions of land that had been set aside for the federal government in 1832. This situation hindered development in the area and prevented fair access to the springs. All of this would soon change after Colonel Samuel W. Fordyce moved to Hot Springs in 1876...

Samuel W. Fordyce

EARLY LIFE

Samuel Wesley Fordyce was born in Senecaville, Ohio, on February 7, 1840. He was one of eleven children. Samuel Fordyce attended college in Pennsylvania and Illinois, and by the age of twenty, he worked as a station agent on the Central Ohio Railroad.

CIVIL WAR

Fordyce enlisted as a private in the First Ohio Volunteer Cavalry in the Army of the Cumberland, which served in Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. He quickly achieved the rank of colonel in the Army of the Cumberland, fighting in the Battles of Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, and Shiloh, as well as many other minor engagements. Fordyce was wounded at least 3 times, and he was captured 3 times by the Confederates. However, he never served a day’s imprisonment—twice he was freed by fellow Union soldiers, and once he escaped on his own. As colonel of his regiment, Fordyce was responsible for a district in northern Alabama. Part of his responsibility was to secure the Union lines. Occasionally, a Confederate soldier would sneak past the Union line to visit family living in the district.

WIFE

On one such occasion, a Confederate officer slipped past the Union line to visit his family. Fordyce knew of the Confederate's whereabouts, so he gathered 6 of his men to accompany him to the Confederate's home under the cover of night. When Fordyce burst through the door, he found the Confederate unarmed and surrounded by his family. However, his pistol lay on the bureau in reach of his 18-year-old daughter. She quickly grabbed the gun to defend her father. Fordyce rushed forward to disarm her, and in the struggle, her pistol fired and she was shot through the hand, but her father escaped safely. A few days later, Fordyce returned to the home to check on the young woman's hand and apologize for the incident...and he continued to visit her again and again. Fordyce eventually married this woman, Susan Elizabeth Chadick, on May 1, 1866. The couple had 5 children.

HUNTSVILLE, AL

After the Civil War, Samuel and Susan Fordyce settled in Huntsville, Alabama, where Fordyce established the banking firm of Fordyce & Rison with partner, William Richard Rison. Fordyce became a leader in the development of northern Alabama, serving as President of the first Agricultural Fair & Mechanical Association in Huntsville and helping to finance the North and South Alabama Railway.

MOVE TO H.S.

Injuries sustained in the war were aggravated by working long hours and caused Fordyce's health to decline (Fordyce had rheumatism? And malaria at one time?). In the mid-1870s he sought relief in the healing waters of Hot Springs, Arkansas. Fordyce arrived in Hot Springs on April 15, 1873, and first stayed in a hotel operated by his friend, S. H. Stitt. Under the care of Dr. Almon Brooks, Fordyce regained his health. In 1876 Fordyce moved his entire family to Hot Springs.

Contributions of Fordyce

PROPERTY DISPUTE SETTLED

Due to the success of his banking business, Fordyce had enough capital to invest in Hot Springs's infrastructure. He envisioned the town as a major health resort and immediately tried to make the area more accessible and desirable. In 1877 the U.S. Supreme Court squashed the property dispute in Hot Springs, reestablishing government control over the springs. Thanks to a chance incident at Pittsburg Landing during the Civil War in which Fordyce helped General Ulysses S. Grant regain control of his horse, Fordyce persuaded then-President Grant to establish in 1877 a commission to reconfirm the reservation boundaries and regulate business

activities along Hot Springs Creek. This was necessary to allow everyone fair access to the springs and prevent any single entity from establishing a monopoly on the healing waters. The Hot Springs Commission appointed a reservation superintendent, and of course, the first Hot Springs Reservation Superintendent was General Benjamin F. Kelly, an old friend of Samuel Fordyce...

...after the 1878 fire in Hot Springs destroyed many of the early bathhouses, the federal government established stringent standards for bathhouse construction, transforming the rough frontier town into an elegant Spa City. Part of the plan was enclosing Hot Springs Creek in an underground arch covered with earth (1883-84). The 1880s are known as “the elegant ‘80s” in Hot Springs because the town became a destination for American trend setters, regardless if they were sick or not.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Fordyce became president of the Hot Springs Street Railway Company (streetcar) in the late 1870s; established the Hot Springs water, gas, and electric light companies; and financed the Hot Springs Opera House, the Arlington (2nd building in 1893—burned 1923) and Eastman Hotels, and the Hot Springs Golf and Country Club. He built the Fordyce Bathhouse, which opened on March 1, 1915. Designed by Little Rock architects George R. Mann and Eugene John Stern and constructed under the supervision of owner Sam Fordyce's son, John, the building eventually cost over \$220,000 to build, equip, and furnish. Sam Fordyce deliberately waited until the Maurice Bathhouse was complete to finish his own in order to improve on whatever amenities the Maurice offered. Totalling approximately 28,000 square feet, the Fordyce is the largest bathhouse on the Row and was known for being the best.

Fordyce was also influential in obtaining the Army & Navy Hospital in Hot Springs in 1887—located here to utilize the healing powers of the hot springs (current hospital building constructed 1933 to replace original).

RAILROADS

Fordyce was probably best known as a railroad man. In the early 1880s Fordyce surveyed the route for the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, or Cotton Belt, through Arkansas, and he became president of the company in 1885, which required that he establish another residence in St. Louis, Missouri. Fordyce successfully built and managed numerous railroads across the Southwest during the late nineteenth century—it is estimated that he financed and built at least 24,000 miles of railway in all. Notably, Fordyce was responsible for the construction of the Little Rock, Hot Springs & Western Railroad, which provided a direct connection between

Little Rock and Hot Springs, further developing the spa city. The south Arkansas town of Fordyce is named after him, and he also named the town of Rison after his business partner in Alabama.

POLITICS

Although Fordyce never ran for public office, he was very influential in politics, serving on many national Democratic Party committees and enjoying friendships with Presidents Grant, Hayes, Harrison, and McKinley.

“The Cabin”

In 1878 Fordyce purchased about 1,200 acres on Park Ave., along with a small house, from an old French doctor named Alfred Arnauld. When Fordyce moved his family to St. Louis in the late 1880s, he always dreamed of retiring in Hot Springs. By 1903 Fordyce had retired from his position as president of the Cotton Belt RR, and made plans to return to the Spa City. He hired the respected St. Louis architectural firm of Mauran, Russell, and Garden to design a log house reminiscent of a late 19th or early 20th century railroad hostelry. Construction on the imposing 4,338-square-foot home began in 1904 and was completed by 1909. “The Cabin,” as Fordyce called it, was designed in the Rustic, Adirondack style with an exterior of logs and stone; its ribbon windows and multiple porches further integrated it with the surrounding environment. Colonel Fordyce loved the outdoors and was an avid sportsman. He decorated the interior walls of “the Cabin” with his weapons collection and trophies of the hunt. John Rison Fordyce, the eldest of Samuel’s three sons, served as construction engineer on the project.

There are conflicting rumors about the logs used to construct the Cabin—1. Fordyce used timber from each county in Arkansas, or 2. Fordyce obtained all timber from his land.

ADDITIONAL STRUCTURES/SITE FEATURES

As you can see, there were additional structures and site features built on the property. Some of these may have been constructed by Col. Fordyce shortly after the main house, some were probably built by the home’s next occupant, John Rison Fordyce, and some were built in the late 1930s by Maj. Gen. Ricks. There are a few construction dates that I’m not quite sure about—I can tell you with certainty that most of the other structures and site features were here before the 1930s. We’ll discuss these resources after we finish at the main house.

Fordyce's Death

The Cabin became Fordyce's primary residence during his later years. His health began to decline, so he and Mrs. Fordyce traveled to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to spend the summer of 1919, hoping that the "invigorating sea breeze" would restore his strength. Sadly, Fordyce died on August 3, 1919, in Atlantic City. He was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis.

John Rison Fordyce

Because John Rison Fordyce was the eldest of Col. Fordyce's 3 sons and served as engineer on the house, J. R. Fordyce inherited "The Cabin" and managed the family's interests in Hot Springs. Susan Chadick Fordyce continued to live in St. Louis until her death on March 1, 1935.

John Rison Fordyce was significant in his own right. He received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering from Washington University in St. Louis before becoming president of Thomas-Fordyce Manufacturing Company in Little Rock, which produced cotton gin machinery. In 1917 Fordyce was commissioned a major in the Engineers' Reserve Corps of the U.S. Army and became the supervising engineer for the construction of Camp Pike in North Little Rock (now part of Camp Joseph Taylor Robinson). Following World War I, Fordyce was promoted to the rank of colonel. Throughout his lifetime, he was a talented inventor, creating mechanisms to streamline the cotton-ginning process as well as portable shoe-repair and bread-mixing facilities for the U.S. Army. Fordyce was also an amateur archeologist and had an extensive collection of Native American artifacts...most of which were probably fakes...like many people, J. R. Fordyce subscribed to the idea of De Soto and other Spanish conquistadors invading the "Valley of Peace" [Hot Springs]—so named b/c all Native Americans got along here—no evidence to support this theory...instead, the idea probably originated with railroad companies to promote tourism and settlement here b/c Native American artifacts and folklore were a popular marketing tool in the early 20th century...Quapaw Bathhouse...cave & Hopi gods.

[Earliest records date to 1771 and don't state that bathing in the springs was a cultural practice for Native Americans...book called "Didn't all the Indians come here?"]

Following the disastrous Mississippi River flood of 1927, representatives from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi joined to form the Tri-State Flood Commission in an attempt to coordinate relief efforts. John R. Fordyce was chosen as one of five Arkansas commission members. Then-U.S. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover worked closely with the commission and attended a meeting at “The Cabin” on September 12, 1927. The attendance roster for this meeting reads like a “who’s who” of prominent citizens and political leaders from the three Delta states during the early twentieth century. In addition to Hoover, those in attendance included John Ellis Martineau, Governor of Arkansas, 1927-1928; LeRoy Percy, wealthy planter and U.S. Senator from Mississippi, 1910-1913; R. O. Young, prominent Louisiana sugar cane farmer; L. O. Crosby, Mississippi lumberman; Harvey C. Couch, industrialist and founder of Arkansas Power and Light; John M. Parker, president of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange and Governor of Louisiana, 1920-1924; and of course, John R. Fordyce (see group photo). In 1936 Fordyce moved to Little Rock (1900 N. Spruce, LR).

[J. R. Fordyce and wife, Lillian A. Powell Fordyce, had 4 children. J. R. Fordyce died June 9, 1939.]

Earl Thornton Ricks

After selling some acreage to the National Park Service, J. R. Fordyce sold the remaining 400 acres of the original estate in 1937 to Major General Earl T. Ricks. [The Fordyce property may have been owned briefly by Byron L. Neimeyer, who was managing the Fordyce Bathhouse by 1935, or Neimeyer may have showed the house to prospective buyers as a favor to the Fordyce family. Neimeyer may be related to A. J. Neimeyer—owned sawmills in Malvern and Little Rock.]

An only child, Earl Thornton Ricks was born on July 9, 1908, in West Point, Mississippi. His family moved to Stamps, Arkansas, about 1916. Ricks developed a keen interest in aviation at an early age, and in 1928 he attended Parks Air College in Cahokia, Illinois, and obtained his pilot’s license. Ricks’s father rewarded him with a \$375 two-passenger biplane upon completion of the course.

In 1930 Earl Ricks married Stamps native Hazel Brown, whose father, Thomas Addis Brown, was a partner in the Bodcaw Lumber Company, one of the largest sawmills in the South at that time (now owned by International Paper Co.). Earl and Hazel Ricks had four children. The family moved to Hot Springs in 1935, where Ricks partnered with Raymond Clinton (the future president’s uncle) in the Ricks-Clinton Buick Company. Although the Ricks family initially lived in a

house on Lake Hamilton, they soon looked for a home closer to downtown Hot Springs because the eldest of the Ricks children, Nancy June, needed to be near a school. In 1937 Ricks purchased the Rustic-style Fordyce House because it was just a few miles from downtown and had enough acreage to accommodate the family's livestock. Soon after purchasing the house, Ricks built a barn adjacent to the carriage house as well as a fieldstone terrace, wall, and barbeque pit behind the main house.

In March 1940 Ricks enlisted in the Arkansas Air National Guard, achieved the rank of second lieutenant, and was called to active duty the following September. After a brief stint at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Ricks was sent in November 1941 to Miami, Florida, to set up the South Atlantic Ferry and Transport Route to China, India, Egypt, and South and Central America. Ricks became commanding officer of the 36th Strategic Air Base in Miami, which was the main debarkation point for U.S. troops heading to North Africa during World War II. Ricks was then sent in 1943 to serve as commanding officer at Payne Field in Cairo, Egypt. Having risen through the ranks quickly, he was promoted to the rank of colonel on April 26, 1944, and was stationed in the South Pacific to fly air transport planes. The Pacific Division Air Transport Command was headquartered in Brisbane, Australia, and eventually flew to bases in New Zealand, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, the East Indies, the Philippines, Okinawa, and Japan. In August 1945 Ricks was chosen to fly the Japanese delegation from Ie Shima to Manila, Philippines, where they received the terms of surrender from General Douglas MacArthur, signifying the Allied victory in Japan.

After World War II, Ricks returned to Hot Springs, where he resumed his automobile business and started a charter flying service before running for mayor in 1946. He challenged longtime Hot Springs Mayor Leo McLaughlin, whose political machine relied on election fraud and illegal gambling revenues to control the spa city. Ricks was part of the GI Revolt led by Hot Springs native Sidney McMath, who took a personal interest in ousting McLaughlin. Coincidentally, Ricks and McLaughlin were friends before World War II because they both enjoyed riding horses. McLaughlin withdrew from the mayoral race three weeks prior to the election. Ricks won by a landslide, but served only one term as mayor (1947-1949).

Sid McMath became Arkansas's 34th governor in 1949 and appointed Ricks adjutant general. On April 21, 1949, Ricks was named brigadier general. He was promoted to Major General on Feb. 27, 1951, and sent to serve as Chief of the Air Force Division and deputy chief of the National Guard Bureau in Washington,

D.C. Major General Ricks and his wife, Hazel, moved to Washington, D.C., but their children remained at “The Cabin” in Hot Springs because they wanted them to be raised and educated in Arkansas. The eldest child, Nancy June, cared for her three younger siblings while General and Mrs. Ricks were gone.

While on a visit to Hawaii, Ricks had a cancerous growth removed from his foot and only lived for six more months. Major General Ricks died on January 4, 1954, at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. In 1983 he was posthumously inducted into the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame. The 188th Fighter Wing at Ft. Smith was called “Ricks Rippers” to honor him, and the Air National Guard Outstanding Airmanship Award is named after him. Ricks Armory in LR was also named in his honor.

Hazel Ricks continued to live at “The Cabin” off and on until her death in 1996. The property is still owned by the Ricks family, and Nancy June (Ricks) Bryant lives nearby. Property has been reduced to 17 privately owned acres and about 20 acres belong to NPS (including lake and water wheel).

Main change to cabin exterior is addition of carport in 1970s.

The Cabin Interior

Original flooring and paneling in most of house. Some light fixtures are original, and some are from an old house on Central Ave. Wiring poking out of walls is where lighting sconces were once located—Fordyces removed them when they left.

Photos of Thomas Addis Brown (Hazel’s father; lumberman) in living room, Maj. Gen. Ricks photo above dining room mantel, Hazel Ricks and her twin, Helon, in frame on same mantel...

Living Room

Dining Room

Butler’s Pantry

Kitchen—in 1937 a General Electric kitchen was installed with metal cabinets and a dishwasher...still in very good shape. Tab built the island in the kitchen.

Bach porch was originally open to air—enclosed sometime prior to 1937. Enclosed porch area has novaculite fireplace and an original Tiffany lamp.

Study—Room with pocket doors. Contains old 8 mm films Ricks made while serving overseas in WWII as well as the big map that Hazel used to keep track of where he was.

Bedroom behind main fireplace—was Fordyce's room to store his things—lined with shelves and cabinets. Originally a wash basin in the corner and no bathroom. Has small balcony overlooking lake. Bedroom redecorated about 1946 and bathroom added.

There was originally a water closet drawn under the stairs...like there is now.

Stairs—bookcase by stairs was here when Ricks family bought house. Items on stairs from Maj. Gen. Ricks career—photos of Earl with planes, propeller from the only plane he ever crashed, Ricks Rippers sign.

Tapestries upstairs—may date to the 1880s??

Upstairs:

Notice leaded glass fanlights and sidelights upstairs & original light fixture at top of staircase.

Go to left bedroom first—leaded glass casement windows and window seat. Fireplace. Bathroom was added later...this was an open area they enclosed for a bathroom. Shower has window to outside...

Turn corner into another small bedroom with window seats and built-in bookshelves.

Triangular-shaped closet is closed in area of upstairs hallway...used to be able to access this back bedroom directly from hall.

Master Bedroom—with fireplace. Has photo of Earl flying over pyramids.

Kids' room/Baby nursery

Original upstairs bathroom with all original elements except toilet with tank on wall. Toilet has been replaced. Still got original tub with shower apparatus, sink, and built-in shelving.

Down hallway—next upstairs bedroom possibly added later by Samuel Fordyce—not on original plans. Has been completely modernized with track lighting, etc.

Continue down hallway to servant's rooms—this large play area was once divided into a small linen room and two servant's rooms. Now open. Back staircase leads down to kitchen. Also attic access from here. You can get to the tower, but it's very difficult...

Carriage House:

Built shortly after main house—may have been remodeled b/c exterior design looks more like 1920s than early 1900s with board-and-batten siding and exposed rafter tails. Also had really neat garage doors that slid around to the side on a track—still see the track. One bay has a recessed oil pit for working on automobiles—also says something about changes to building in 1920s era. Four servant bedrooms and a restroom upstairs. Whole rear portion of second story is screened-in.

Barn:

Built in late 1930s by Earl Ricks to house the family's horses.

Small House:

Built in 1962 by Hazel Ricks.

Old stone fishpond in front yard

Go around behind Main House...

Fieldstone terrace, wall, and BBQ pit:

Built in 1936-37 by Earl Ricks...notice the giant clam shell on the terrace; General Ricks brought it back from the South Pacific after WWII.

Smokehouse/Root cellar or cold storage area:

Built about same time as house.

"Susan's Rest" Gazebo:

Probably built around the same time as the Fordyce Bathhouse (1915) because it uses the same white ceramic tiles on the bench seat and red tiles on the roof. This was constructed for Susan Chadick Fordyce in her old age, so she could sit and look at the lake. In 1915, she would have been in her early 70s...

Option to go on walking trail down to bridges, lake, water wheel...

Driveway pergola & covered bench

Lawn Tennis Court—still see the concrete holes for net in the ground.

New gazebo...for Tab's new event/wedding/reception business...

Foundation from Dr. Arnauld's old house that was here in 1878 when Fordyce acquired the property. Ricks finally tore it down because it was falling in.

Walking/Riding Trails: Likely laid out by Samuel Fordyce himself. He helped to lay out many of the early trails in the National Park. At one time, these trails were part of a larger system that led down to the Fordyce Bathhouse.

Fordyce Lake was made by damming Gulpha Creek with a crenellated stone dam.

Big Stone walking bridge

Smoker with piping for scalding hogs

Boathouse piers: The Fordyce's had a beautiful two-story boathouse on the lake, but it was demolished in 1993 by the NPS because it was in such poor condition...

Smaller stone bridge

Water wheel with stone building: Has 1921 in the concrete below the exterior wheel. May have been used to generate electrical power for the main house. Also rumored to have pumped water up the hill to a cistern behind the carriage house, but that's not likely...

Conclusion

Aside from the reduction in acreage over the years, the Fordyce-Ricks House Historic District remains largely unaltered and serves as one of the best collections of Rustic-style architecture in Arkansas. And its association with some of

Arkansas's most interesting and important historical figures makes it even more significant.

Thank you for coming!

Questions?