

**Walks through History
Downtown Forrest City**

Begin at the First United Methodist Church, 101 S. Izard St.

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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Good morning, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, which is a state agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of Downtown Forrest City! I’d like to thank the First United Methodist Church for allowing us to use their beautiful building today, and I’d like to thank a few people for their help with the tour—

Jenny Vandiver with the Gladlands;

Dr. Stuart Towns;

Louise Ferguson Lockhart;

St. Francis County Museum Director Dena French;

Denny Jarratt;

Ralph Pipkin;

And Dr. Tom Higgs.

This tour is worth 2 hours of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

Brief History of Forrest City

Arkansas's Territorial Legislature created St. Francis County in 1827 from part of Phillips County. The new county was named for the river that runs through it. More than likely, the St. Francis River was named by the 17th century French Canadian explorers Father Jacque Marquette and Louis Joliet, but it is not certain which saint served as its namesake—either St. Francis of Assisi or St. Francois Xavier. By 1861 the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad had been completed from Hopefield (opposite of Memphis) to Madison on the St. Francis River and from Huntersville (present-day North Little Rock) to DeValls Bluff on the White River. Construction of the middle section between Madison and DeValls Bluff was delayed by the Civil War. But in 1866, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest obtained a contract to build railroad tracks over Crowley's Ridge and established a commissary near the present-day site of Forrest City, which was named in his honor. Forrest City was platted on March 1, 1869, and incorporated as a town on May 11, 1870. In 1874 the St. Francis County seat was moved from Madison to Forrest City, where it remains today. Forrest City is the only such named city in the world spelled with two Rs. The town developed rapidly after the completion of the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad in 1871. In the 1880s, the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad intersected with the Memphis & Little Rock at Forrest City, transforming the town into a bustling commercial center for area farmers.

Most of you remember the devastating fire on May 27, 2012, that destroyed historic buildings in the western half of the 500 block of Front Street. Although bittersweet, this tragic event has spurred some interest in downtown Forrest City. Heritage tourism is one of the largest industries in the state, but in order for Forrest City to get a piece of the pie, the city must capitalize on its unique historic resources. I encourage each of you to get involved and support the revitalization of downtown Forrest City.

Downtown Buildings

First United Methodist Church (NR-listed 5/19/1994)—

This building was completed in 1917 for the First Methodist Episcopal Church South (Methodist Episcopal Church divided in 1844 over the issue of slavery, becoming the ME Church and the ME Church South; did not reunite until 1939). The Classical Revival-style church was designed by British architect John Gaisford, who came to the United States in 1896 when he was about 20 years old and settled at Memphis. Gaisford enjoyed a thriving practice in Memphis, designing private homes, churches, and the Memphis YMCA (at 245 Madison Ave.). His work was so popular that in 1910-11 the Methodist Episcopal Church South commissioned him to write a book called “How to Build the Church.” The book contained building plans for churches of every size.

The Forrest City church was probably one of Gaisford’s last designs, as he died on August 31, 1916. The building features Classical Revival elements like the massive Ionic columns at the front entrance, projecting cornice, and rounded arch window openings. The sanctuary interior retains most of its original appearance, including the beautiful stained glass windows and proscenium arch. In 1951 an education building was constructed just to the south of the 1917 church.

In 2010 the Methodist Church received a HPRG from the AHPP for roof, cornice, and masonry repairs.

South on Izard Street

In 1869 a local businessman named U. B. Izard proposed a survey for a town near the old commissary site, and on March 1 of that year, county surveyor John C. Hill marked off a 36-block town site, which became Forrest City. Izard and Hill streets were named in honor of these men.

Dr. J. O. Rush House or Rush-Gates House (St. Francis County Museum)—

Before this house was built, a small collection of 1-story, wood-frame buildings were located here and served as Cook’s Hotel and Boarding House. Dr. J. O. Rush

built this Colonial Revival-style house in 1906-1907. The Rush House served as his residence and medical clinic. Dr. Rush was a physician for the railroad, so it was important for his home and practice to be conveniently located near the tracks. He often made house calls on horseback or by buggy, and he was also known to use a handcar on the rails to get to patients out in the country. Dr. Rush was an amateur historian and amassed a large collection of significant Native American pottery and artifacts from the St. Francis River valley. His daughter and son-in-law, Annie Rush Gates and her husband, David Gates, later owned the house. It became the St. Francis County Museum in 1997.

Carriage block along Front Street stamped with "JO RUSH" and rings for tying up horses.

Outhouses—Because Dr. Rush ran his medical practice out of his home, he built outhouses in the yard east of the house for patient use (to keep his wife happy).

Point to location one block east of Rush House.

About 1915 a steel viaduct was constructed over the railroad tracks at Forrest Street. It was there until at least 1949. No longer extant. Was demolished in the 1980s.

Point south across tracks to the
St. Francis County Courthouse—

By the late 1890s, a simple 2-story building located east of the present-day courthouse served as both the county courthouse and jail. In 1897 a 2-story, Romanesque Revival-style courthouse was completed at a cost of \$26,700 on the site of the present building. It was designed by well-known Arkansas architect Charles L. Thompson and featured three towers of different size and shape. The building faced west, and the 3-story clock tower was at its northwest corner. The building to the east of the courthouse then became the county jail.

The 1897 courthouse was demolished in the early 1970s to make way for the current courthouse, which was completed in 1976 (cornerstone on building says 1971?).

The bell from the clock tower of the 1897 courthouse is displayed on the lawn of the current courthouse. It was manufactured in 1898 by the M. C. Shane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, Maryland.

Walk to northwest corner of Front & Izard (stay near this spot & then go across tracks)

Vacant lot with murals—

Streetscape mural shows Front Street from Izard down to Rosser and the Vaccaro Lumber Company. By the early 1890s, this entire stretch of Front Street was full of commercial buildings, most of which were 2 stories in height. A 2-story opera house was located on this corner. The opera hall was upstairs, and the two downstairs storefronts housed the post office and a furniture store. Front Street was a busy place in the early 20th century, with restaurants, furniture stores, grocery stores, dry goods/clothing/shoe stores, barbers, banks, drug stores, meat markets, etc.

Other murals—1897 courthouse & view looking south across the tracks at the courthouse and the Forrest City Hotel, which we'll get to in a minute...

May 27, 2012 fire destroyed the buildings on the western half of this block of Front Street. The new building for Forrest City Abstract Company was already here at that time and survived the adjacent blaze.

In the mid-20th century, the following businesses were located in this block:

From east to west—

Gregory's Furniture, later Dreyfus Furniture

Ideal Grocery, owned by the Kessinger family (Donnie Kessinger graduated from Ole Miss, played for the Chicago Cubs, and later became the baseball coach at Ole Miss)

Parker's Furniture

Haven Hardware, run by Charlie Haven. Haven opened the store in 1947 after returning from service in World War II. He was first elected in 1933 to serve as Forrest City treasurer and continued in the position for 50 years.

Hodges Hide Store

Walk south on IZARD to courthouse and buildings on Court Street

By the early 1890s, a 2-story, wood-frame boarding house stood near the southwest corner of IZARD & S. Front (now Court) streets (N. Front was parallel to the tracks on the north side, and S. Front was parallel to the tracks on the south side; confusing). It was called the IZARD House, then the Shepard House, and by 1908 the Forrest City Hotel. In the 1920s, a Coca-Cola Bottling Plant was built just to the east of the Forrest City Hotel. Then sometime in the 1930s or 40s, the bottling plant expanded to the west, and the Forrest City Hotel was no more. The FC Hotel was depicted in a mural across the street. East Arkansas Community College got its start in 1974 and initially held classes in the old bottling plant. The bottling plant is no longer extant (however, the basement is preserved under the parking lot on this corner).

Walk west on Court Street

The first 1-story building may date as early as the 1930s, but I'm not sure about that. Historically, buildings in this part of the block housed a plumbing business, auto repair, paint shop, and a grocery.

The 2-story building at the southeast corner of Court & Washington—
Has new brick veneer and windows, but may have historic elements underneath. On the 1908 and 1913 Sanborn maps, the building houses an undertaker. By 1919, it was the Hotel Turner, followed by the Fisher Hotel. In 1949 it housed a dry cleaning business.

Cross Washington to see old cornerstone of Elks Home.

Southwest corner of Washington & Court—

This building was constructed in 1913 by the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Lodge No. 1219 to serve as an Elks' Home. The building was originally 3

stories in height—it is currently missing its top two stories. When completed, the first floor was commercial space, and the storefront on Washington was a printing shop (later a library). Two storefronts faced Court Street and were occupied by an undertaker and a music store. The second and third floors of the building housed the Elks' Home. By the 1940s, the building was used as a National Guard Armory. It was later called the Montgomery Building and was the only building in town with an elevator.

From the Carpet One parking lot, look west toward Rosser but on the south side of the railroad tracks (northeast corner of Court & Rosser)—site of the Marion Hotel.

Marion Hotel—What most people remember as the Marion Hotel was built here in 1885. The 3-story, Italianate-style building served as the passenger depot, dining room, and offices for the Little Rock & Memphis Railroad (the Memphis & LR later became the LR & Memphis before becoming the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific) on the first floor with hotel rooms on the upper two floors. It was known as the Forrest City Hotel until about 1908, when it became the Marion Hotel (and the boarding house on Court Street then became the Forrest City Hotel). The Rock Island Railroad continued to use the first floor of the Marion Hotel as its passenger depot after it acquired the LR & M line (the building's first floor was used as a depot until at least 1949). The Marion Hotel was later called the Belsor Hotel and the Avery Hotel. The building was demolished in 1958. Railroad passenger service on the doodlebug car was discontinued in the late 1960s.

The area west of Carpet One was once occupied by Gates Bros. Lumber Co. and lumberyard. The buildings were demolished in the 1970s.

The Little Rock & Memphis Railroad had a small freight depot on the north side of the tracks across from the hotel. The Rock Island Railroad built a new freight depot on the site about 1910. This depot was demolished in the early 1980s.

Walk north on Washington, cross the tracks, and stand at the northwest corner of Washington and Front.

Point down to Fussell (“Fizzell”)-Graham-Alderson Co. Building at the southeast corner of Washington & Broadway.

This building was constructed in the 1920s and features cast-stone urns on the parapet as well as decorative cast-stone panels with shells, garlands, and human faces in relief. The Fussell-Graham-Alderson Company moved from its Front Street location to this building at the busy intersection of Washington and Broadway (Hwy. 1B and Hwy. 70). More on the company later...

From the F-G-A Building going south along Washington, there were several notable buildings. Next to FGA was the 1-story Broadway Drug Store, then a 1-story dress shop, and the 1-story City Drug Store. Just north of the alley was the 2-story, Art Deco-style Rosemary Theater. The theater was named after Rosemary Haven Kirkpatrick. The Haven family also owned the Imperial Theater at the northeast corner of Washington and Hill streets. Just south of the alley, and still facing west on Washington Street, was the 2-story Bank of Eastern Arkansas, which had a handsome cast-stone first floor and was designed by Little Rock architect Charles L. Thompson.

Walk west on Front Street

Empty lot at NW corner of Front & Washington—site of a 2-story, 19th century building with a decorative, raised parapet. In the early years, it housed a general store and drug store with doctors’ offices upstairs. In more recent memory, it was Krutchfield’s Clothing and later, Jones Furniture. Dr. John Burke’s dentist office and possibly Dr. Benton’s office was upstairs. Behind this building facing Washington was a liquor store and a clothing shop called Eloise’s Tots to Teens.

1-story buff brick buildings (415-417-419 Front)—I’m not positive about this, but I think this building was constructed in the 1880s or 1890s as a 2-story building with 4 storefronts. Based on the building’s current footprint and the brick on the

alley wall, I think it was shortened to 1-story and veneered with buff brick sometime in the 1930s or early 40s.

In a late 19th century photo, the building housed (from east to west) the Square Deal Store, the Fussell-Graham-Alderson Co. (took up the middle two storefronts), and the Emporium Millinery (which later became Malouf's Café).

Fussell, Graham & Co. was founded in 1875 by Captain James Fussell and W. S. Graham. The company sold everything from clothing and dry goods to furniture, buggies, and caskets. The gentlemen were later joined by J. W. Alderson, and the name changed to Fussell-Graham-Alderson Co. The business was first located here on Front Street and advertised dry goods, clothing, hats, shoes, hardware, furniture, and buggies. In the 1920s, the business moved to the southeast corner of Washington and Broadway.

In more recent memory, 417-419 Front housed Western Auto, and 415 was Runyan Hardware. Was Dixie Furniture Co. here in the mid-1950s?

Bargain Store & Pawn Shop—2-story commercial buildings dating from 1915 used to occupy this half of the block up to Howe's Grocery on the corner. Businesses included Kimball's Grocery and the Golden Rule Dime Store.

Howe's Grocery (NE corner Front & Rosser)—
Built ca. 1915. Great example of early 20th century commercial-style architecture with a raised parapet, brick corbelling at the cornice, and decorative metal vents. The Howe family was Chinese and operated a grocery store here. They lived upstairs. Ghost sign reading "Howe's Cash Gro." on the building's west side.

SW corner Rosser & Front—site of Forrest City Wholesale Grocery Company, which was built about 1905 and was demolished in the 1980s. The company was recently purchased by Core-mark.

NW corner Rosser & Front—Vaccaro Lumber
Current building was constructed in the 1920s. Notice its unique shape, which was necessitated by the presence of railroad lines (the Missouri Pacific line ran to the

west of the building, and a spur track extended along its north elevation). In 1907 the Grobmyer Lumber & Feed Co. started in this location. About 1915 the business became the Vaccaro-Grobmyer Lumber & Feed Co. The company sold lumber, building materials, glass, hardware, paints, cement, and hay and animal feed.

Empty lot at SW corner of Rosser & Broadway (Vaccaro Lumber parking and recycling bin)—

By 1892, this site was occupied by the Arkansas Cotton Oil Company. About 1900, the Forrest City Gin Co. constructed a cotton gin, gristmill, and coal yard here, which remained until the 1920s. By 1930, James Fussell (“Fizzell”) operated The Service Company here. The Service Company consisted of a cotton gin and an automobile filling station at the corner. This was later Buddy Buick Company.

Behind Howe’s Grocery (east side of Rosser)—

Harlem Theater (for African-American patrons), taxi stand, liquor store

Cotton Alley—In the 1930s and 40s, this became known as “Cotton Alley” because cotton buyers set up shop in storefronts facing the alley. You can barely make out a ghost sign advertisement for cotton factors in the alley (white square with very faint lettering).

3 two-story buildings on Rosser—

113 Rosser—About 1900 a 1-story calaboose was built on this site. This building was constructed ca. 1905 and features segmental arch window openings on the second floor, recessed panels with brick corbelling, decorative vents, and cast-iron storefront columns. The building originally had a raised parapet (similar to the Howe’s Grocery building, but it has been removed). The building first housed the city hall and jail (indicated on 1908 Sanborn map). In 1913 it housed a dry goods store and a jail in the back of the brick portion, and by 1919 it was a grocery with a jail in the back. The large 1-story addition on the back of the building was a grocery warehouse.

In more recent memory, this was Berlotzki's Dry Goods/General Store and later Pete Adams Furniture.

111 Rosser-built ca. 1905. Features rounded arch window openings on second story, decorative brick at parapet, and cast-iron storefront columns & threshold (kick plate). Housed a meat market (maybe Grobmyer Meat Market?) and later, a hardware store. In recent memory, this was Wilenzick's Clothing (men's & women's clothing). As you might have realized from the names of the proprietors, there were many Jewish merchants in Forrest City, and several of them had businesses on Rosser Street.

109 Rosser-built ca. 1905. Originally had decorative details similar to the buildings next door, but a new buff brick veneer was added to the building ca. 1940. Notice the metal-frame windows with casement sashes and the cast-stone band with geometric designs. In the early years, this was Paslay & Johnson, grocers (I think). In recent memory, it was Memphis Tailors, a clothing store.

Vacant lot—the building on this site housed Snyder's & Barg's (they were brothers-in-law). They bought and sold animal hides. This was Snyder's first location. He also had a junk yard, but not here.

Southeast corner Rosser & Broadway—

Hilliard's Bargain Basement occupied the south (right) part of the main level as well as the basement. Hilliard's had footprints on the sidewalk, which led you inside to the bargain basement. Ferguson's Drug Store was located in the corner storefront on the north (left) side of the building before moving across the street. In the 1960s, Southern Furniture and Mercantile was located in this building.

Walk north on Rosser (cross Broadway)

Northwest corner Rosser & Broadway—

This was Jim Edgar's Drug Store before Ferguson's Drug moved here in the 1950s. In 1959 a fire destroyed everything on this corner except for Ferguson's. There

was a Chinese grocery behind Ferguson's, and the owner lived in his commercial building. According to Louise Ferguson Lockhart, her father went back to look for that gentleman during the fire, and he had already gotten out of the building. Both men were unharmed. Ferguson's later extended their building to the alley and put a new brick veneer on the front. Ferguson's Drug remained here until 1998.

105-107 Rosser—built after 1959 fire destroyed previous building on site. 105 was Sharp's Tailor-made Suits for Men (later Shirack's Jewelry), and 107 was Coen's Department Store.

NE corner Rosser & Broadway—now parking lot with hedge

In the early 20th century, a negro boarding house occupied this corner. By 1930 a large auto dealership and filling station was here and faced south on Broadway. I think this was Forrest City Motor Company, also known as Eldridge Chevrolet. Dooley's Department Store was later at this corner.

There were commercial storefronts on this side going north along Rosser as well. They housed a variety of things, including Claude O'Dell's photography studio (became Forrest City's unofficial photographer) and a barber shop.

Gadberry's—

This was Laser's ("Lacer's") Ben Franklin 5 & 10 store.

Commercial buildings filled the rest of this block (SW corner Rosser & Hill). No longer extant. Some businesses here include Cleo's Store, Perry's Grocery, Davidson's Store, Gadberry's Shoe Store & Rofe Eldridge's Hardware.

SE corner Rosser & Hill—

Church of the Good Shepherd Episcopal Church-

Built 1891. The Parish House, called the John Young Memorial Parish House, was built in 1926. The Episcopal Church is an excellent example of the Gothic Revival style with a castellated tower, pointed arch window and door openings, a steeply

pitched roof with parapets, and cast-stone quoins. In the early 20th century, the rectory was located just to the east of the church (now driveway/parking).

Walk one block north to SE corner Rosser & Garland to see city hall

Forrest City's City Hall-The City Hall building was constructed in 1938 by the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, which in 1939 was renamed the Public Works Administration (PWA). The PWA was a New Deal program designed to build large-scale public works projects like dams, bridges, hospitals, and schools. The PWA existed from 1933 until 1943.

City Hall features Art Deco-style detailing in cast-stone on its front façade.

Walk back to Hill Avenue and head east toward Washington

SW corner Hill & Washington

Parking lot—First Baptist Church was constructed on this corner in 1892. An education building was constructed just to the south of the church in 1937. The parsonage was located just to the west of the church building (no longer extant). In 1950 the Baptist Church bought land at Rosser & Cleveland streets and constructed a new church (1952). The old church building was later demolished, and in the 1950s the Baptist Church Education Building became the Regional Headquarters for Arkansas Power & Light Co. (building still extant).

NW corner Hill & Washington

Forrest City Post Office—

The 1931 Forrest City Post Office was designed in the Colonial Revival style by the Treasury Department's supervising architect, James A. Wetmore. The building is a textbook example of Colonial Revival architecture with a symmetrical façade, dormer windows, balustrade, arched window openings, limestone pilasters, and a broken pediment at the entrance.

NE corner Washington & Hill

Imperial Theater—

Built ca. 1925. Was owned by the Haven family. The front entrance and steps have been altered. There was a side entrance for African-American patrons, who sat in the balcony.

Red brick portion of Hunton Office Supply—built ca. 1928 to house the Maid-Well Garment Company, which was a garment factory. The building later housed Ash Furniture and Graeber's Department Store. In the 1950s, the Soil Conservation Service was located upstairs in this building.

Point out 220 N. Washington—Stevens Funeral Home. Built between 1930 and 1949 (probably ca. 1935). Collegiate Gothic-style architecture.

Also—W. S. Graham Memorial Presbyterian Church at SE corner Washington & Dillard. Built 1922-23. Changed the name in 1923 from the Presbyterian Church of Forrest City to Graham Memorial after a gift from Mrs. W. S. Graham in honor of her husband, who died in 1900. Mr. Graham was a founding partner in Fussell ("Fizzell")-Graham-Alderson Co. The church was built in the Gothic Revival style and was modeled after a church the Grahams saw during a vacation to England.

Walk south on Washington, almost to Broadway

NW corner Broadway & Washington

First National Bank of Eastern Arkansas—

The Bank of Eastern Arkansas was established in 1886. In 1929 it purchased the assets of the First National Bank of Forrest City, which opened in 1902 as the Bank of Forrest City. In 1932 the institution was chartered as a national bank and became the First National Bank of Eastern Arkansas.

This wonderful mid-century modern building was designed in 1961 by the Little Rock architectural firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell, Carter & Neyland.

Get a closer look at the Fussell-Graham-Alderson Building

NE corner of Broadway & Washington—

KXJK & KBFC Radio Station-Assuming there is original material left somewhere, the building was constructed in the early 20th century and was 2 stories tall. The Barrow Hotel was upstairs as well as the telephone exchange office (before it moved to the corner of Hill & Izard). The first floor storefronts housed a variety of businesses, including Sam Mann's law office and another location of Ben Franklin 5 & 10. The top floor of the building burned in the early 1940s and was removed.

Walk east on Broadway back toward the Methodist Church

Hwy. 70 was paved in 1930 and was called the "Broadway of America," stretching from North Carolina to California.

North side of Broadway to the east of the radio station building—site of St. Francis Motor Company.

The St. Francis Motor Company was a Ford dealership and also had a Gulf filling station in it. Firestone was located next to the motor company.

There was another filling station at the NW corner of Broadway & Izard—Bishop Esso Station.

South side of Broadway between Washington & Izard where black fence is now located—site of Watkin's Café.

Watkins Café was a very well-known restaurant run by Paul Graves (his wife was a Watkins). The café served steaks, seafood, chicken, homemade pastries, and fresh vegetables. There was another location on Hwy. 70 at West Memphis.

The Corner Store at SW corner of Broadway & Izard—was Palace Drug Store.