

**Walks through History**  
**Judsonia Bridge & Historic Downtown Judsonia**  
**Begin at the Judsonia United Methodist Church at the corner of Van Buren &**  
**Washington streets**  
**October 12, 2013**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



*Judsonia Bridge (1924)*



*Judsonia Community Building (1937-1938)*

## **Intro**

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of Historic Downtown Judsonia. I’d like to thank the White County Historical Society for co-sponsoring the tour and providing refreshments. And I’d especially like to recognize Bill Leach for his help with the tour.

2 hours of AIA continuing education credits available for architects.

Today we’ll discuss the history of Judsonia and see 5 properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

## **Brief History of Judsonia**

Prospect Bluff—settled by Erastus Gregory, 1835. First highland on the northern bank of the Little Red River (above West Point). Was a river port. Platted in 1840 by surveyor Phillip Roberts, who named the streets after U.S. presidents.

About 1870, people from the northern and Midwestern United States settled north of Prospect Bluff at Judsonia. Judsonia and Judson Academy were named after the first Baptist foreign missionary, Adoniram Judson.

Judson Academy—founded by northern Baptists and Prof. M. R. Forey, who formerly taught at Chicago University. Judson Academy was open from 1871-1883 and for one year in 1888.

Judsonia—combined Prospect Bluff & Judsonia in 1874. Judson Academy received a state charter to operate as a university in 1874, and the sale of liquor was prohibited within 3 miles of the university.

Railroad/Depot Town—Cairo & Fulton in 1872, went east of downtown because of the availability of cheaper land. Resulted in a new section of town called Depot Town because of its proximity to the depot.

Strawberries—major industry in Judsonia. Strawberries first grown in 1874 by Daniel W. Wheaton. Industry declined in the mid-1950s due to a labor shortage and the difficulty of mechanization.

1949 Hwy. 367 bypassed downtown

March 21, 1952, tornado—The deadliest tornado outbreak in Arkansas history occurred on March 21, 1952, when 112 people lost their lives statewide. Judsonia was one of the hardest hit towns, suffering 44 fatalities.

## Walk south on Van Buren to Judsonia Bridge

Judsonia Bridge (NR-listed 4/9/1990)—

Before the Judsonia Bridge was completed in 1924, people had three ways to cross the Little Red River—walk across the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad Bridge (built 1912), ford the river, or ride the ferry (which was operated near the foot of Main Street—one block to the west). As you can imagine, this was very inconvenient for farmers transporting produce or livestock. So by 1915, the people of Judsonia supported the construction of a bridge. Although six companies presented bids for the contract, County Judge John Marsh refused to release funds for the bridge due to political and/or personal reasons. Several years later, in 1923, under the leadership of County Judge F. O. White (and because the ferry stopped operating in 1921), the R. L. Gaster Construction Company out of Little Rock was hired to build a bridge for \$45,000. The bridge was completed on January 25, 1924, but the contract did not include the approaches, so the community came together to build them. Local contractor Oscar Stevens built the southern approach with donated money, and the people of Judsonia volunteered their labor and resources to build the northern approach. J. S. Ladd donated the fill dirt, which was moved to the site by wagonloads from three blocks away (it took about 1,500 trips to move all the dirt), and more than 100 men worked on the approach for two days before it was finished. At noon on the first day of work, local women provided workers with a meal served at tables on the bridge.

The bridge, then known as the “wagon bridge” as opposed to the railroad bridge, was designed with a cantilevered swing truss to accommodate river traffic, which by that time was most often a loaded barge from Bee Rock quarry (a rock quarry for the railroad; near present-day Camp Wyldewood north of Searcy). The central span of the bridge could swing 90-degrees counterclockwise to create two 125-foot shipping lanes. The swing mechanism was operated by one man, who was summoned by the whistle of a boat. A key or lever was inserted into a shaft, which was accessed through a hole in the floor deck in the center of the bridge. The shaft turned gears under the deck, which moved 8 wheels on a steel track to

open the bridge. The Judsonia Bridge formed an important link in the system of roadways, providing easier access to Searcy and Little Rock. Interestingly, the bridge deck accommodated two-lane traffic in the early years because it was mostly traveled by wagons and Model Ts. By the late 1920s, barge traffic decreased and with it, the need to open the bridge. [The bridge may have been opened once in the late 1950s or early 60s.] The turning mechanism has been soldered, so the swing span is no longer operable.

The Judsonia Bridge is significant because it is one of three swing truss vehicular bridges remaining in Arkansas, and it is the only one designed with a cantilevered swing span, which evenly distributed weight over the center pivot when the bridge was in an open position. The other two swing span bridges are also listed on the National Register—Black River Bridge at Pocahontas (Randolph Co.) and St. Francis River Bridge at Madison (St. Francis Co.). Because of its significance, the Judsonia Bridge was rehabilitated with money from the Arkansas Transportation Enhancement Program and White County (ISTEA pays 80% and sponsor pays 20%). The bridge reopened in March 2013 and is used frequently (County Road 66 goes to Kensett).

St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad Bridge—  
Built in 1912 by the St. L, IM & S Railroad, which in 1917 became Missouri Pacific. The railroad bridge also has a swing span. It is still in use (Union Pacific).

### **North on Van Buren**

Box Factory—

Brothers J. M. and Frank Cathcart moved from Indiana to Judsonia in 1885 and opened the Judsonia Box Company, which produced wooden boxes (quart-size) and crates (held multiple quarts) for storing and shipping strawberries. After the Cathcarts, the factory was owned by C. H. and W. F. Hoag, and later by Wilshire Riley. In 1910 the box factory was purchased by J. H. Roth and C. A. Figley, who changed the name to the Enterprise Box Company. That year the factory manufactured 40,000 boxes and crates. By the early 1940s, the factory covered

almost 15 acres of land and produced 850,000 boxes and crates a year. In 1944 between 60 and 120 men worked at the box factory, based on peak production times during the strawberry harvest.

The box factory burned to the ground on July 1, 1944, and was immediately rebuilt. The Enterprise Box Company reopened one year later. After World War II, the factory was run by Arle Queen and Charles A. Figley, Jr. It operated until at least 1965.

Buildings—main factory building, maybe a drying shed for lumber, possibly a superintendent's house in front?

[The water tower was torn down fairly recently.]

Site of cotton gin on west side of Van Buren near river—

There was a cotton gin and seed warehouse on this site by 1913. In 1919 it was run by L. A. Pryor, and by the late 1930s, it was operated by T. H. Beals. There were at least two cotton gins in the Judsonia city limits (this one and one near the NE corner of 8<sup>th</sup> & Jackson run by C. E. Martindale).

Building across VB from box factory—this was the headquarters for the White County Paving Company, followed by the Jack Wood Paving Company (later run by Billy and Danny Wood?). By the late 1930s, A. P. Moody's Ice Plant and Cold Storage business was located on this site.

SW corner Van Buren & Washington—

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a blacksmith shop on this corner. For a time, it was run by Lonnie Glosson's ancestors. Glosson, a Country Music Hall of Fame harmonica player, was born in 1908 in Judsonia. By the late 1930s, there was a filling station on this corner (source of the foundation). An auto repair business was located just to the west (still extant). A filling station was also located at the SE corner of Van Buren and Washington in the 1930s.

NW corner of Van Buren & Washington (Post Office parking lot)—

Site of the Elliott Hotel—

The Elliott Hotel, a 2-story, wood-frame hotel with a wrap-around porch, was located on this site until the mid-1980s. The oldest part of the hotel was built by Robert Beane in 1871. He was succeeded by E. D. McAllister, who was then succeeded by Ms. Mattie Elliott. Mattie Elliott ran the popular hotel for more than 50 years. She was widowed twice, and in order to support her children, Ms. Elliott ran the hotel. The Elliott Hotel was known for its good food. When Mattie Elliott died in 1935, her daughter, Maud Dunn, managed the hotel.

The current post office was built in 1990.

### **East side of Van Buren, going north**

#### **200 block**

Methodist Episcopal Church, South—

*Notes about Methodism:* The Methodist denomination had several splits in the nineteenth century, where groups split off to form separate congregations with slightly different beliefs. But the largest and most divisive split in the Methodist Church happened in 1844 over the issue of slavery. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South supported slavery, while the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) did not. Most Methodist Episcopal (North) churches in Arkansas ceased worship until Reconstruction. Even after the Civil War, Arkansas Methodists were segregated in two separate conferences within the state. The Uniting Conference of 1939 joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and Methodist Episcopal Church (North) to form the Methodist Church. However, the Methodist Church remained racially segregated by annual conferences until 1972. The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 when the Methodist Church joined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

Because many of the early Judsonia residents were transplants from the northern and Midwestern United States, they aligned with the Methodist Episcopal (North) Church. And a Methodist Episcopal church was completed in 1881 at the SW

corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Jackson. But by 1910, more Judsonia residents aligned with the beliefs of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and decided to split off and start their own church. They constructed a building at the corner of Van Buren & Washington in 1910. After the uniting conference of 1939, the town's two Methodist congregations merged and occupied a building on this site. The Church of Christ congregation bought the old Methodist Episcopal church building and moved into it. I believe that most of the current building dates to 1910 (see steeply pitched turret and lancet window; education annex built in late 1920s or early 30s), but the mixed masonry veneer was added in 1950. The 1952 tornado damaged the Methodist Church, but it was not destroyed like the Baptist and Church of Christ buildings. So the Methodist church was used as a recovery center after the storm.

Methodist Parsonage—a ME, South parsonage was built on this site about 1920 and was badly damaged during the 1952 tornado. The house was moved to another site and later housed Briggs-Kinney Funeral Home. A new parsonage was built here to replace it.

Three storefronts—this building was built ca. 1905 as one building with three storefronts. It was a red brick building with recessed panels on the upper façade and a decorative parapet in the center. In 1913 the building housed hardware, furniture, and dry goods stores. The Judd Theatre was started in 1937 by Lowell Launius in the Beals Building on the west side of the 300 block of Van Buren. In 1938 Launius sold the Judd to O. C. Waller, who in September 1941 moved the Judd Theatre to the middle storefront, which at that time was next door to his strawberry plant company's office (not sure which side this was on). The roofline of the Judd Theatre was raised to accommodate the projection equipment and screen. You can still see "Judd Theatre 1941" stamped in the concrete sidewalk in front of the building. When did the Judd Theatre close?

The building was badly damaged by the 1952 tornado, but it survived. The southernmost storefront sustained the most damage. Stucco was added to the exposed brick facades after the storm. And the vinyl and metal were more recent

additions. However, the northernmost storefront remains relatively unaltered (besides the stucco).

212 Van Buren—early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial-style architecture with recessed central door, 2-over-2 windows, wooden bulkheads, transom window above door, and carved wood storefront columns. Interesting to see this type of column executed in wood—may have been a replacement material after the tornado? These are usually cast-iron. 212 Van Buren housed a doctor's office in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Site of the Briggs Building—

The Briggs Building was constructed here in 1888 and was then known as the Culbertson Building. The 2-story building was, at that time, the largest building on Van Buren Street and featured a decorative pressed metal façade. When this building opened, it was home to Culbertson & Martin's furniture, hardware, and undertaking business. Martin sold his interest to F. G. Briggs. The Culbertson-Briggs partnership didn't last long—they split in 1890. Culbertson kept the hardware portion, and Briggs kept the furniture and undertaking departments. Interestingly, Mr. Briggs turned the second floor of the building into a theater for live performances. The second floor later served as a lodge hall for the IOOF. Briggs ran the undertaking business in this building until his death in 1948. In 1938 Jim Kinney purchased an interest in the firm. Briggs-Kinney Funeral Home relocated after the 1952 tornado (moved to the north side of Adams about one block to the east) and was later purchased by Powell Funeral Homes, which continues to operate in Searcy and Bald Knob.

Bert Briggs, brother to F. G. Briggs, was the editor of the *Judsonia Advance*.

The Briggs Building survived the 1952 tornado but later burned. It was gone by the late 1980s.

### **300 block**

Dr. C. W. Jackson Clinic—built to replace an earlier 1-story building that was damaged/destroyed by the 1952 tornado. I believe this was previously the



location of Dr. Riley's Drug Store, and the "Riley brick" was the first brick building constructed in Judsonia (1880)???

Judsonia Pharmacy (Valu-Rite) Building—Built ca. 1915 as an auto sales room with a garage out back (12-car capacity in garage). By the late 1930s, it housed a printing business. In more recent memory, it was a drug store. Brick corbelling at cornice.

Next two buildings with in-filled storefronts—built ca. 1915. The southernmost building housed a grocery (maybe Orr Grocery?) in 1919, while the northernmost storefront was a dry goods and millinery store.

At some point, the Fair Store (chain of variety stores) was located in one of the buildings on this end of the block.

In 1986 fire badly damaged these buildings, prompting the alterations to the roof and storefronts.

Masonic Lodge—

A 2-story, brick building built ca. 1910 occupied this site prior to the 1952 tornado. It housed the Bank of Judsonia on the first floor (until the bank closed in the early 1930s during the Great Depression), and the Anchor Lodge No. 384 Free & Accepted Masons met upstairs. After the tornado, a single-story building was constructed and dedicated on September 20, 1952. Interestingly, Prospect Bluff Lodge No. 236 was organized here in 1866, but for some reason, lost its charter. A new charter was granted to Anchor Lodge No. 384 in 1881.

Municipal Building—built 2003

### **400 Block**

Based on what I can tell from photographs taken right after the 1952 tornado, there was a restaurant on this corner that was completely destroyed by the storm. So this white, concrete block building dates to 1952 or later.

Building with red metal and rock—just the walls remained standing after the tornado. Not sure what was here.

Rest of red metal building—new construction after storm.

A large building dating to at least 1919 that housed a hardware and furniture store and later a flour warehouse was destroyed by the tornado, creating this empty lot. The Church of Christ annex is newer construction.

Notice that the block between Madison and 6<sup>th</sup> (the **500 block**) is not as long as the other city blocks. The area going north from Madison was platted by the Baptists—this is the dividing line between the old Prospect Bluff plat and the Judsonia plat. The street names also change here. From 6<sup>th</sup> Street going north, Van Buren Street becomes Judson Avenue, and the east-west streets are numbered.

W. E. Orr City Park/Judsonia Community Building Historic District (NR-listed 9/5/1991)—

When surveyor Phillip W. Roberts laid out the town of Prospect Bluff in 1840, he set aside a public square, which he called Franklin Square, for a public park.

Franklin Square is the block bounded by Van Buren, Adams, Main, and Jefferson (the west side of the 300 block of Van Buren). However, this block never turned into a park. Instead, when the Judson Addition was surveyed in 1872, this block (with the community building) was designated for public use.

In the early years, a high board fence surrounded the park property, and a pavilion and bandstand were located on the block. During the 1880s, the pavilion was used as a skating rink. The annual Fourth of July celebration/picnic was held at the park for many, many years (now held at new park on 367).

The Colonial Revival-style community building was designed by the Little Rock architectural firm of Brueggeman & Swaim and was built in 1937-1938 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The stone landscape features were also built by the WPA. The community building complex was dedicated on June 28, 1938, in front of a crowd of 400 people. The community building's roof was

completely blown off during the 1952 tornado and was rebuilt. In the aftermath of the tornado, large tents were set up in the park to provide shelter for people whose homes were destroyed.

The tennis court (now basketball) was built ca. 1991, and the library was constructed ca. 1990.

The community building is still used often for square dancing, boy scouts, library programs, voting, wedding receptions, etc.

The playground equipment is also historic—see merry-go-round, swings, teeter-totters, and slide.

Sandstone Church of Christ building—built on site of old ME Church, which the C of C had purchased and been using since 1939. It was destroyed by the tornado, and C of C rebuilt within 2 years.

### **West side of Van Buren, going south**

First Baptist Church—

The Judsonia Baptist Church was organized in 1872 by Rev. M. R. Forey and had 12 charter members. Initially, the Baptist Church met in the Judson Academy building, which was located near the current Judsonia School complex (east side of Judson Ave. between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>). When Judson Academy closed in 1883, the Baptist Church needed another place to worship. In 1885 they bought land at the southwest corner of Judson and 7<sup>th</sup> and constructed a wood-frame church (bell tower finished in 1891 and housed the bell from the Judson Academy building). A new Baptist Church was constructed on this site in 1950, but it was destroyed by the March 1952 tornado. It was rebuilt and was dedicated on March 8, 1953.

### **500 block**

Brick commercial buildings—built ca. 1935. In the 1950s, Elzie Darden bought a dry cleaning business from Harvey Holmes (who had bought it from the Jennings family). The southernmost building (left) housed Darden's Cleaners (see painted sign on the south side of the building).

Old service station—

There was an Esso filling station here when the tornado hit. Some parts of this building may be original to that station.

White building with green awning—has been a pool hall for several years.

First Security Bank—

This corner was occupied by a 2-story, brick building (ca. 1920) that housed the Farmers & Merchants Bank (organized in Judsonia in 1914). The bank building was destroyed by the tornado.

**300 block—stand at corner and point out a few things before heading west on Jefferson...**

**This area was platted as Franklin Square.**

Grassy lot—site of Hearn's Grocery. The original grocery store building was destroyed by the tornado (and at least two people were killed in the store at that time). The store was later rebuilt and run by Bobby Hearn. Destroyed by fire in 1992.

Barber shop—May date to mid-1930s, but it could have been destroyed and rebuilt after the tornado. The barber was Bobby McAdams.

Storage units—

This was the site of the Beals Building, which was built in 1910 by T. H. Beals and surpassed the Briggs Building as the largest building on Van Buren Street. The 2-story building had a double-decker front porch. The first floor storefronts housed a grocery and meat market, racket store, dry goods store, and a confectionery. The second floor was a theater, complete with a projection booth and a screen. A post office annex and street-side stair access was completed in 1912 (before that time, patrons had to use an alley staircase to get upstairs for a show). In the late 1910s and the 1920s, the Electric Theatre operated upstairs in the Beals Building.

In 1937 Lowell Launius started the Judd Theatre in the first floor of the Beals Building and showed talking pictures seven days a week. In 1938 he sold the Judd to O. C. Waller, who moved it to the east side of the 200 block in 1941. The 1952 tornado destroyed the top floor of the Beals Building, and it was demolished. You can still see a small concrete building toward the alley. According to Sanborn maps, there was a 10,000-gallon water tower right behind the Beals Building. In fact, the original alley staircase to the second floor was built around the water tower frame. By 1919 a concrete equipment building was built right under the water tower. I think it housed a pump and possibly an engine.

### **West on Jefferson & South on Main**

309 Main—Alfred W. Henson House (NR-listed 10/23/1986)—

The Henson House was built in 1884 by John Debois as an I-house (2-story, 1 bay deep, central hall, 2 rooms downstairs, 2 rooms upstairs). The home was remodeled about 1920 in the Neoclassical style of architecture with a triangular pediment supported by fluted, Ionic columns and a dentil course at the cornice. It is the best example of the Neoclassical style in the area.

It belonged to prominent merchant Alfred W. Henson and his family. Alfred Henson was born in 1854 in Mississippi and moved with his family to Judsonia in 1857. When Alfred was nine years old, his father died. This put a significant amount of pressure on him to help around the farm and provide for his mother and younger siblings. Henson wanted to be a lawyer and even enrolled in Judson Academy but had to postpone his education due to a lack of finances. He tried to work a year and go to school a year, but it was impossible to keep up with his studies and work on the farm.

He married Rose Lee Meadows and opened a mercantile store on Van Buren Street. Henson was successful because he bought items in bulk from the freight-car lots in Depot Town and sold goods to area farmers at cheaper prices. He constructed a new building for his store in 1919 at the NW corner of Van Buren and Adams (still there). Henson was the president of Farmers & Merchants Bank from the time it was organized in 1914 until his death in 1929. He also had extensive landholdings.

His wife preceded him in death—she died in 1923 due to injuries sustained in a car accident.

Tragically, Alfred and Rose Lee Henson's only daughter, Laura Lee Henson (b. 1896), died during her freshman year at Henderson College after her dress caught fire (she was standing too close to a stove). We'll see her grave at Evergreen Cemetery.

SW corner Main & Adams—C. D. Kelly House (NR-listed 9/5/1991)  
Built by C. D. Kelly about 1925. Great example of a Craftsman-style house/airplane bungalow.

### **East on Adams to Henson Store**

Henson Store at NW corner Van Buren & Adams—  
I just talked about Alfred Henson. He built this building in 1919 to house his mercantile store. When Alfred Henson died in 1929, the store was given to his son, John, who operated it until 1948, when the stock was sold to Leonard, Ralph, and Raymond Stevens. So this is also known as the Stevens Building.

### **200 block Van Buren, west side**

Site of the Ne-hi Bottling Plant (no longer extant).

### **Drive to Evergreen Cemetery**

Grand Army of the Republic Monument (NR-listed 5/3/1996)—  
Presumably because a large number of early Judsonia settlers were from the northern and Midwestern United States, many men felt loyalty to the Union during the Civil War, and some even joined the Union Army. The Grand Army of the Republic Monument was erected in 1894 by the W. T. Sherman Post No. 84 of the GAR. The dedication ceremony was attended by both Union and Confederate veterans, and there was no resentment when the inscription was read aloud: "In memory of the Defenders of the Union, 1861-1865." At the time of its dedication,

this GAR monument may have been the only one located in the South. [At least one other GAR monument is located in Arkansas—in Siloam Springs, dedicated in 1928.] Graves of Union soldiers surround the monument, and they were buried there after the monument was erected because they did not have surviving family members or burial plots.

Laura Lee Henson's grave—the mourner—

Laura Lee Henson, the only daughter of Alfred W. and Rose Lee Henson, was born on February 1, 1896, and died on November 25, 1914. She was just 18 years old and a freshman at Henderson College in Arkadelphia. During an event at the college, Henson stood too close to a stove and her dress caught on fire. She was badly burned and died as a result of her injuries.

Her grave marker is a mourner scattering flowers, which was a popular stock marker during the Victorian era.

Questions?

Lunch options on 367:

KJ's Restaurant

BBQ truck