

**Walks through History
Pocahontas Commercial Historic District
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By: Rachel Silva**



Intro

Hello, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the March Walks through History tour of downtown Pocahontas. The Pocahontas Commercial Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 25, 2009, for its association with the development of Pocahontas as a regional trading center on the banks of the Black River and for its collection of late 19th and early 20th century architectural styles. Now I'd like to introduce Bill Carroll, a leading advocate for historic preservation in Pocahontas, and thank him for his help with this tour. Bill will say a few words before we get started...

Brief History of Pocahontas

Pocahontas, the Randolph County seat, has a rich history dating back to the last Ice Age, some 18,000 to 14,000 years ago. Randolph County's location on the dividing line between the Ozark foothills and the Delta lowlands, combined with the county's five navigable rivers (Black, Current, Eleven Point, Fourche, and Spring rivers), made this a prime area for settlement. In the early 1670s French explorers Marquette and Jolliet recorded the location of a Michigamea village on the banks of the Black River in present-day Pocahontas. The Michigamea were an Algonquin Tribe from the Great Lakes area who migrated south and served as traders and middle-men between the Osage and Quapaw. The Osage Tribe occupied much of southern Missouri and northwest Arkansas, while the Quapaw lived in eastern and central Arkansas.

The Southwest Trail (or Natchitoches Trace or Military Road) entered Arkansas at the northeast corner of Randolph County, further contributing to the area's growth and importance as a regional trade center. Following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, American settlers began migrating to the lands west of the Mississippi River in greater numbers. Many of the area's earliest American settlers were from Kentucky and Tennessee. Lawrence County, Randolph County's parent county, was created in 1815 as part of the Missouri Territory with the seat of justice located at Davidsonville. As most of you probably know, Old Davidsonville State Park is located just a few miles south of Pocahontas. The settlement at Davidsonville had the first regional post office (1817), subscription school (1815-1818), and Baptist Church (1818) in what is now the state of Arkansas. Davidsonville ceased to exist by the late 1820s because the Southwest Trail had shifted to the west, taking residents with it.

Now we have to backtrack a little bit to talk about the first American settlers in present-day Pocahontas. I already mentioned the Michigamea village along the Black River at Pocahontas, but the town's first American settler was Thomas O. Marr, who arrived in 1807 from Kentucky. Downtown Pocahontas would have been part of Marr's farm. And you will notice that Marr Street (which we'll be on in just a minute) and Marr's Creek are named after him.

Then in 1817 a ferry operator from Greenville, Missouri, named Ransom Bettis came down the Black River looking for another suitable ferry site. Bettis picked present-day Pocahontas because of the flat area by the river and the high limestone bluff, where buildings would be high enough to escape flood waters. Bettis purchased land along the Black River and on the bluff from Thomas Marr. Eventually, the bluff and settlement around it became known as Bettis Bluff. Ransom Bettis is considered to be the founder of Pocahontas... Notice Bettis Street is named after Ransom Bettis.

Arkansas Territory was created in 1819, and in 1831, the Southwest Trail became the first road in the nation west of the Mississippi River to receive federal support for improvement, and after this it was known as the Military Road and became the first leg of Arkansas Territory's mail route. Population growth in the area led to the creation of Randolph County in 1835. Randolph County was named for John Randolph, a U.S. Senator from Virginia who fought for congressional approval of the Louisiana Purchase. The new county government sought to establish a seat of justice. Two communities were selected for consideration—Columbia and Bettis Bluff. Although Columbia had a larger population and was the favored candidate, Ransom Bettis and his son-in-law, Thomas Drew, hosted a barbeque (with free

liquor) to attract voters to Bettis Bluff on Election Day. Since men could vote anywhere in the county, and the barbeque attracted a large number of people, Bettis Bluff won the election and became the Randolph County seat. Soon after the election, Bettis Bluff was renamed Pocahontas (no one knows why).

Thomas Marr became the first postmaster, and Thomas Drew, who would become the third governor of Arkansas (1844-1849), donated property for a county courthouse. The first courthouse was constructed by Thomas Marr between 1837 and 1839 for \$2,400. Beginning in the 1830s, steamboat traffic on the Black River made Pocahontas a busy river port. During the 1840s and 1850s more freight moved in and out of this port than any other in Arkansas. Pocahontas was officially incorporated in January 1857. Because Randolph County bordered Missouri, and had navigable rivers as well as the Military Road leading to Little Rock, it was a strategic location during the Civil War. Union troops burned most of downtown Pocahontas in 1863. We'll talk more about this later...

In the 1880s as Pocahontas was recovering from the devastation of the Civil War, a sizeable number of Roman Catholics settled here and helped to rebuild the community. Father Eugene Weible, a Roman Catholic priest from Switzerland, visited Pocahontas and then returned to Europe to recruit Swiss, German, French, and Austrian Catholics to come back to Arkansas and start a Catholic community. Among these settlers was a young German named Henry Lesmeister, who grew up to design many of the buildings in downtown Pocahontas as well as several in Jonesboro. Two other notable German Catholics owned the town's leading construction and mercantile businesses—Ferdinand Spinnenweber and Lesmeister's brother-in-law, Hubert Peters. Spinnenweber and Peters constructed most of the buildings that Lesmeister designed in Pocahontas. Joseph Schmidt arrived in Pocahontas from Bavaria in 1885 and specialized in brick making. He used the sand from the river banks and the red clay from the hills to make bricks in large kilns. Many of his locally made bricks were used to construct the buildings in downtown Pocahontas.

The Iron Mountain and Frisco Railroads initially bypassed Pocahontas, and since railroads were replacing steamboats as the major mode of transportation in the late 1800s, Pocahontas "entered a passive state" until 1896 when the Frisco Railroad constructed a branch line from Hoxie to Pocahontas. That line extended northeast to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in 1902-1903, further benefiting Pocahontas. Even though steamboat traffic had been reduced, steamboats still ran on the Black River as late as the 1920s. [Railroad tracks removed in late 1970s-1980s.]

The Black River was so named because the river bottom was lined with black river mussels, and the “Pearl Rush” that began in 1897 attracted people in search of river pearls. It is said that people removed about \$4 million (in today’s dollars) worth of pearls. The river mussel harvest led to pearl button manufacturing, where pearl buttons were punched out of the mussel shells. Pocahontas had 7 pearl button factories at one time. The Randolph County Heritage Museum contains one of these button factories. The demand for pearl buttons went down by the mid-1940s due to the advent of plastic buttons and the zipper.

Electricity came to Pocahontas in 1911, and the streets were first paved in 1928. All of the buildings in the commercial historic district except two were constructed from the 1880s to the mid-20th century.

Imperial Theater (302 N. Marr—C)

The Imperial Theater was constructed in 1939 as a cinema. It was built by the local construction firm of Spinnenweber and Peters. The Imperial Movie Theater was here until the 1970s, and then the building housed the Studio for the Arts and the Imperial Dinner Theater until it moved to its new location off Hwy. 304. The building is currently home to the Randolph Music Theater, which has live performances every Friday and Saturday. The Imperial was constructed on the site of the former 2-story brick county jail.

Note the building’s Art Deco-style façade, featuring a boxy shape, smooth glazed brick wall surfaces, and a vertical emphasis provided by the stepped parapet and rectangular panels of basket-bond brickwork and glass block.

Across Marr St. from Imperial Theater

This lot was home to one of Pocahontas’s grandest buildings until about 8 years ago. The large 3-story building featured a cast-iron storefront and was the second home to Spinnenweber and Peters. The Pocahontas Opera House was located on its top floor with a seating capacity of over 800. The opera house was the location of the city’s social gatherings in the early 20th century and hosted acts like Blues musician W. C. Handy. Pocahontas High School basketball games were also played there in the 1920s. The building fell into disrepair and was demolished. What a loss...

215 N. Marr—NC (right hand side of Marr heading back to square)

This building was originally constructed about 1900, but it is NC in the district because of ca. 1980 alterations, including the addition of a shed roof. The rear portion of this block, known as the Hamil Block because of the Hamil Mercantile on the corner (now the Green Tomato Café), was home to Tom Carr's Coffin Factory at the turn of the 20th century. Between 1910 and 1922, this building housed a grocery store and a general merchandise store.

211 N. Marr—C

This building was constructed circa 1922 to replace an earlier structure on this site. Previous tenants in this location included a produce store, a barber, and a restaurant. Notice the recessed brick panels and decorative vents, typical of early 20th century commercial style architecture. The transom windows have been boarded.

*The Hamil Block has a central courtyard with trees.

214 N. Marr—C (left side of Marr heading back to square)

With one exception, this entire block was constructed and owned by Spinnenweber and Peters and designed by Lesmeister. They either operated businesses in the buildings or leased them to others.

This building was constructed about 1900 as a 2-story building, but it has since been shortened and has a Roman brick façade, typical of 1940s and 50s commercial buildings. This building housed various things on its lower floor, and the upper floor had rooms for rent. Some of the businesses on the first floor included a restaurant, a pool hall, a grocery, and a general store.

208-212 N. Marr—C

This circa 1900 commercial building features recessed brick panels, decorative vents, and brick corbelling at the cornice. This building was home to Peters Grocery (in left storefront) and Bennett and Rice Grocery (right storefront) around the turn of the century. Bennett and Rice Grocery delivered, so a grocery wagon and team was usually tied to a hitching post on the street. The left storefront later housed Blissenbach Furniture Store.

North Marr St. Alley—C

This was the Marr Street entrance to what was at various times the Spinnenweber and Peters Mercantile and other times the St. Louis Bargain Store. The building was constructed in an “L-shape” with the main entrance at 104 E. Everett (now Integrated Therapy Services).

Go up to Everett and stand in front of museum to see Old Randolph County Courthouse—IL (4/24/1973)

The first two courthouses in present-day Randolph County were built at Old Davidsonville (the 1st courthouse in Arkansas) and at Old Jackson, but they were actually the county seats of Lawrence County. Since its creation in 1835, Randolph County has only had 3 courthouses, 2 of which still stand. As I told you earlier, future governor Thomas Drew donated land for the first courthouse in Pocahontas. It was built here on this lot by Thomas Marr between 1835 and 1837 for \$2,400. It was a 2-story structure measuring 40 feet square. By 1850 the first courthouse was collapsing and unusable. It was in such sad shape that the Union raiders who burned the town in 1863 didn't bother to torch the courthouse.

After the turmoil of the Civil War, a new courthouse was constructed to replace the first one. Now known as the Old Randolph County Courthouse, this building was completed in 1873; however, the contractor, John A. McKay of Helena, wasn't paid due to a dispute over the bonds issued to finance the courthouse. McKay refused to turn the building over to the county for 2 years while he was waiting to be paid the construction cost of about \$40,000. In 1875 the county took possession of the building anyway, and the contractor was eventually paid.

This courthouse is one of the best examples of the Italianate style of architecture in Arkansas. Characteristics of the style include the building's symmetrical façade, tall narrow arched windows with hood molding, prominent brackets under the eaves, and the square cupola. It was listed on the NR in 1973 and completely renovated in the 1980s. The courthouse originally had a 1-story vault addition near its southeast corner.

Interesting story about this courthouse...Legendary Hillbilly singer and musician 'Slim' Rhodes grew up picking cotton in Randolph County. When he was a kid in the 1930s, Slim and his siblings would play on the courthouse steps every Saturday using guitars they had made from cigar boxes and fishing line. They attracted a large crowd and claimed they could make more money from tips on Saturdays than

they could make in an entire week of chopping cotton. Slim eventually went to Memphis and hosted his own TV show in the 1950s and 60s. It was one of the most popular local shows in Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi for many years. Everyone, including Elvis Presley, wanted to be on the Slim Rhodes TV Show.

Cross Everett and stand on courthouse lawn to see north side of square

102 E. Everett—C

This is the rest of the block built by Spinnenweber and Peters...all buildings constructed circa 1898.

Starting on the left, this building was constructed in the late 19th century and housed the Turner Saloon. Every block downtown had a saloon in those days. This building was later home to the St. Louis Bargain Store, Burke's Pharmacy, and then Perrin Pharmacy. This building and the one next to it had brick parapets similar to, but taller than, the Randolph Co. Heritage Museum. They were removed in the mid-20th century in an effort to modernize.

104 E. Everett—C

This building was the other side of the "L-shaped" building (or alley) we talked about on Marr Street. It housed various enterprises of Spinnenweber and Peters before becoming Skinner's Pharmacy in the early 20th century. Will Skinner also had the town's first soft drink bottling plant in the basement of this building. In 1911, he started Skinner Power and Light, bringing electricity to downtown and eventually the residential areas of Pocahontas.

106 E. Everett—C

This building was constructed in the late 19th century to house Spinnenweber's Grocery and also served as dry goods stores such as the St. Louis Bargain Store. It was later Jansen's Grocery. Now home to the Randolph Co. Heritage Museum. Notice the circular vents, recessed brick panels, and brick corbelling.

110-112 E. Everett—C

This late 19th century commercial building housed Jansen's Meat Market.

114 E. Everett—NC

The limestone building on the corner was built in the early 1920s to house the Pocahontas State Bank. The bank failed during the Great Depression, but later housed the First National Bank, Bank of Pocahontas, Pocahontas Federal, and the Planters and Stockmen Bank. The building features some Classical Revival-style details like pilasters and a prominent cornice, but the addition above the limestone on the front façade makes it NC.

NE corner of Everett & Bettis: 200 E. Everett—NC

The Galt House Hotel, built in 1850, occupied this corner. The proprietress was Charlotte James. Around the turn of the 20th century, an ornamental concrete block building was constructed on this corner. It housed a paint shop for many years as well as the City Hall. The current building is NC due to a 1968 fire and subsequent alterations. Just beyond this building to the east facing Everett was a livery stable. The stable was used as a veterinarian's office by 1922.

Go to east side of courthouse

114-120 N. Bettis—NC

The most famous of Pocahontas's old hotels, the St. Charles, was constructed on this block in 1854. It took up the entire block up to the last building on the right. New York architect William Allaire designed the 2-story building, which housed 8 small shops on its lower floor. The hotel was managed by Allaire's wife, Nancy, who was also the daughter of Charlotte James (proprietress of the Galt House Hotel). William Allaire died within a couple years of the hotel's construction, and Nancy married William Evans. Nancy managed the hotel until the early 1900s.

For the story about the St. Charles Hotel, we need to briefly talk about Pocahontas's role in the Civil War. The Union's General Steele was ordered to invade Arkansas early in the Civil War, and with the rugged Ozark Mountains to the west and the swampland to the east, the favored invasion route into Arkansas was through Missouri into Randolph County at Hix's or Pittman's Ferry and down the Black River into central Arkansas.

Recognizing this, in 1861 the Confederate Government of Arkansas stationed almost every Confederate soldier in the state (about 6,000) at Pocahontas. They

were joined later that year by General Sterling Price's Army of Missouri (12,000 men). During that time, Camp Shaver (after Col. Robert G. Shaver of the 7th Arkansas Regiment), located south of Pocahontas, was the major training facility for Confederate troops in the state. In 1862 the Army of the West under General Earl Van Dorn headquartered at Pocahontas with several thousand more troops, bringing the total number in Pocahontas to between 32,000 & 35,000. However, in late 1862, these forces were all ordered to go east of the Mississippi River to fight at the Battle of Shiloh. This left Pocahontas defenseless and vulnerable to Union raiders and bushwhackers from Missouri.

Back to the St. Charles Hotel story...

In early 1863, William Evans, husband to St. Charles Hotel manager, Nancy, and then a Confederate Recruiting Officer for eastern Arkansas, was shot and killed in the lobby of the St. Charles Hotel by a Union assassin in retaliation for the murder of a Union recruiter in nearby Doniphan, Missouri. In August 1863 Confederate General Jeff Thompson, known as the "Swamp Fox," was staying at the St. Charles Hotel when he was captured by Union patrolmen along with several locally prominent Confederates.

In 1863 a group of Union raiders burned much of downtown Pocahontas, but they spared the St. Charles Hotel (b/c the Union commander wanted to make it his headquarters), the 1839 courthouse, and some buildings on the south side of the square.

In 1865 as the war was drawing to a close, 16 Confederates rode up to the St. Charles to surrender. The Union troops inside were unsure of their intentions, so all 16 were shot and killed in the street outside the hotel in what became known as the **St. Charles Massacre**.

After the Civil War, St. Charles Hotel manager Nancy married prominent local planter and merchant Green R. Jones. Aunt Nancy Jones was a well-known figure in town for over a half century. The St. Charles Hotel was famous throughout NE Arkansas for its hospitality and good food. Lunch and dinner were announced each day by the sounding of a large metal gong in the lobby. It could be heard a half mile away.

In 1924 the St. Charles Hotel was sold to the Randolph County Bank, and it burned that same night. The only portion of the hotel remaining is the upper floor of the maroon brick building, which dates from 1858. The upper floor was a brothel in the 1920s.

The *Pocahontas Star Herald*, the county's oldest business, was located on the first floor of the maroon brick building until 1988, when it moved to the old post office (built 1936-37).

102 N. Bettis—C

Randolph County Bank originally on this site. Current building completed about 1925 and housed a restaurant for many years.

Cross Broadway and go east

102 S. Bettis—NC

This building was constructed around 1900 to house the Randolph County Bank. It has been home to Futrell Hardware since 1946. Futrell Hardware was actually established by Marion Futrell in 1936 in the Sallee Building to the east of the current location. In the early years of the business, Futrell Hardware was also a Western Auto franchise. The business is still owned and operated by Marion Futrell's son, Byron, and his wife, Frances.

104 E. Broadway—C

This building, also known as the Sallee Building, was built about 1920. By 1933, it housed a printing business on the first floor and a lodge hall on the second floor.

Rock Buildings on Broadway

The rock buildings on Broadway were constructed in 1939 by the National Youth Administration of the WPA. The NYA existed from 1935 to 1943, and the average age of the workers was 40. The larger building served as the City Hall, jail, and fire department. The smaller building to the east housed the police department upstairs and fire trucks were kept downstairs. These buildings housed the city offices until 1978.

Walk over next to rock building to see Port of Pocahontas...now Overlook Park. Would have been businesses located between square and river like cotton gins, sawmills, cotton oil mills, stave mills, hoop and handle factories, etc.

Also see ca. 1920 Pocahontas-Frisco Railroad Depot, which replaced an earlier depot located to the south of the current structure. The extant depot was used by the railroad until 1970 when it was donated to the city, even though trains continued to serve Pocahontas until 1985. From 1971 to 1983, the old depot housed Elmer “Smokey” James’s used car business.

See large ca. 1920 warehouse, originally used as an egg dehydration plant.

Back to Broadway and stand in front of Black River Beads to tell story about shooting.

In 1931 City Night Marshall Manly Jackson’s body was found in a wooded area about 5 miles north of Pocahontas. He had been shot in the back five times at close range. Local man Leige Dame confessed to the murder and implicated Earl Decker and the city’s Day Marshall, John Slayton, in the crime as well. Dame later recanted his confession, but Dame and Decker were convicted of first degree murder. Slayton was tried 3 times, resulting in 3 hung juries. For unknown reasons, neither Decker nor Dame served time.

The case was closed until 1971 when Alvin “Creepy” Karpis, a member of the notorious Ma Barker Gang, wrote his memoirs from prison. One story told of a night in 1931 when he and other gang members were on their way to Hot Springs via Hwy. 67. Their car broke down in Pocahontas. They came to a used car lot across the street here. They were hot-wiring a car when Night Marshall Manly Jackson approached them. They forced him into the car and took him 5 miles north of Pocahontas on Hwy. 115 and told him to start walking toward a wooded area. Freddy Barker then shot him 5 times. Thus unfolded the town’s only gangland style murder.

Go to south courthouse lawn

The entire south side of the square burned in 1904 and again in 1914. But in 1854, prominent local physician Dr. Michael Beshoars built a pharmacy on the southeast corner of the court square. Except for times when the building was being reconstructed, there has been a pharmacy on this corner ever since. The pharmacy was operated by two generations of the Black family dating back to 1895 and was then Pringle’s Drug from 1908-1930. Rector Johnston purchased it next, and operated it until 1961, when the Futrell family bought the business.

The central portion of this block was occupied by the Court Square Hotel, owned and operated by Mrs. Annie Shively. The hotel had a second story that covered almost the entire block. On the western end of this block there was DeClerk's Saloon as well as Martin Brothers Mercantile and Livery. A post office was also located on this block in 1901—post offices were contracted back then, and there was no central p.o., so you'll see post offices move around town quickly in the early years.

“New” Randolph County Courthouse—IL (8/22/1996)

Stay on corner of Broadway and Marr:

The “new” Randolph County Courthouse was completed in 1940 as the county's 3rd courthouse. Financed in part by the WPA, the courthouse was designed in the Art Deco style with a buff brick and cast-concrete exterior. It was listed on the NR in 1996. The sunken garden landscaping was supposedly a result of a mistake by the contractor when excavating for the building's foundation. The foundation was relocated and the sunken area was incorporated into the overall design. The meteor in the fenced-in area fell in July 1859 in the Black River bottoms of Randolph County. It was discovered by A. H. Keith. In 1986 the Keith family donated the meteor to the county in celebration of Arkansas's sesquicentennial.

Go to west courthouse lawn

The west block of the courthouse square is probably the most intact. The building at the far left (101 N. Marr) was constructed in 1902 to house the Pocahontas State Bank. It later housed the Randolph County Bank, which failed during the Great Depression. All three Pocahontas banks failed during the Depression, as did every bank in Randolph County, except the Bank of Biggers. Mr. Tom Bigger moved the Bank of Biggers to Pocahontas in 1929 and renamed it the Bank of Pocahontas, which endures to this day. This building shows some Romanesque-style influence in its wide, rounded arch window openings and the arched front entrance.

The next three buildings (103-107 N. Marr) are the best examples of Henry Lesmeister's design work in downtown Pocahontas. Note the tall brick parapets with recessed brick panels, decorative vents, and brick corbelling. While this group remains relatively intact, their original facades were even taller than they are today. The building at 103 Marr housed various mercantile establishments in the early 1900s. The Sanitary Barbershop at 105 Marr is the longest operating barber shop in the state of Arkansas, operating in this location since 1887. It was named “sanitary” because each customer was given his own shaving mug, an innovation

at the time, as customers usually shared the same mug. The building at 107 Marr was Schnabaum's Mercantile.

The building at 111 N. Marr (north end of block) was built in the 1880s with the other buildings, but its façade was remodeled in the mid-20th century. This was home to Spinnenweber and Peters Construction Company until their larger building at Marr & Pyburn streets was completed (old opera house). It also housed their horse accessories business—everything one needed to ride a horse, including blankets, saddles, bridles, buggies, and wagon parts.

“Hoxie”—the enclosed alley to the left of this building was the door to “Hoxie.” The door leads to a large central courtyard surrounded by the buildings on the block. During the 1920s and 30s, the men in town would go there to shoot craps. They'd tell their wives they were “going to Hoxie,” which is the name of a nearby town.

Hamil Block along W. Everett

The large building on the corner of Everett and Marr was built in 1894 to house the town's largest mercantile, Hamil Mercantile. This was the first 3-story building in town (it has been shortened), and was built to replace the original wood-frame Hamil Mercantile that burned. The other buildings to its left were also some of the tallest and most ornate buildings in town at one time. The Meier Hotel was located in the center of the block, with Meier's Green Grocers on the bottom floor and the hotel on the top two floors. The building burned in 1928. The last building on the block was also 3 stories tall and housed various mercantile businesses and professional offices.