

Sandwiching in History Tour

Saline County Courthouse, Benton

January 7, 2022

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*Special thanks to: Saline County Judge Jeff Arey
and County Judge Administrative Manager Vicki Hopkins*



Hi there! I'm Ashley Sides and I want to welcome you to the 25th anniversary season of Sandwiching in History with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. For our first program of this year, we've come the city of Benton to tour the Saline County Courthouse.

This is the third county courthouse that has stood here in Benton. And after 120 years, I'd say this one's a keeper. But you know, sometimes you gotta start small...

Saline County was established in 1835, and the following year Benton was chosen as the county seat. William Woodruff, editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, had given 120 acres of land here for the purpose of building a county courthouse: a portion was to be used for the courthouse square and the rest sold at auction to pay for the courthouse building. A sixty-square-foot, two-story brick courthouse was constructed for \$3,500 around 1838. In 1855 it was torn down and replaced with a new courthouse, completed the following year and partially built out of materials from the first one.

By 1902 that second courthouse was no longer adequate either, so a third courthouse was built—this one—at a cost of \$31,000. It was designed by Charles L. Thompson of Little Rock, one of the most prominent and prolific architects in Arkansas during the late 19th century and

the first half of the 20th. Thompson's firm designed some fifteen courthouses around the state, in addition to other buildings and houses, and he worked with a great variety of styles.

Thompson designed the Saline County Courthouse in the Romanesque Revival style. This style had become popular in America in the late 19th century and was especially fitting for a public building like a courthouse. Taking cues from early medieval European architecture, the Romanesque Revival style typically features broad, rounded, often low arches and masonry construction, which conveys a sense of weightiness, solidity, and permanence—qualities that people want their government or justice system to embody!

The Saline County Courthouse also features other typical characteristics of the Romanesque Revival. The truncated hipped roof has complex roof planes and gabled as well as hipped dormers, which in places punctuate the eave line. Towers stand at all four corners of the building, but they create asymmetry with their different heights and shapes. Both two-story towers on the north side are square, but the southwest tower is octagonal. The real focal point, though, is the southeast clock tower. Whereas the other three towers are two stories high, like the rest of the courthouse, this one has four stories, plus a clock chamber and a belfry.

The courthouse was completed in 1902 and court was first held here in September of that year. In 1903, a one-story wing was added to the north side to serve as a jail. A major renovation project in 1939 also expanded the courthouse with an addition to the south for new Depression-era government agencies. You can see this boxy structure with an arched entrance in historical photographs, but that wing was later removed. The northern wing with the jail had been expanded in 1983, but today the jail is located on Neeley Street and the north wing has been converted to county offices.

Although the interior of the courthouse has been updated over the years, many features remain from the original 1902 construction. Fireplaces in some of the offices recall the days before central heating. Sanborn fire insurance maps indicate that these were gas rather than wood-burning. Between the first and second floor are staircases with dark wood turned balusters and turned drops on square newels. The penny tile flooring on the ground floor is original, but the upstairs tiling needed replacement and was faithfully reproduced in 2014 thanks to a \$25,000 grant from the AHPP. Each tile in these floors is painstakingly laid by hand.

The courtroom has been modernized and reconfigured somewhat, but still generally corresponds to the original layout, with the public gallery sloping down from the back wall under the east windows toward the middle of the room. The jury box is still against the other exterior wall, but several windows behind it have been walled off. And the judge's bench has been relocated to the corner, whereas Thompson's original design had it centered along the far wall.

The upper floors of the clock tower are purely functional. Above the roof level, the clock chamber houses a four-faced clock built by E. Howard & Co. of Boston, Massachusetts. The Howard Clock Company was renowned for manufacturing high-quality clocks and watches from

the mid-19th century and well into the twentieth. They were especially known for their luxury watches, regulators, wall clocks, and ... tower clocks. Public buildings around the country feature their clocks. The Saline County Courthouse has one of their hour-striking models designed specially for clock towers. It was originally hand-cranked but was retrofitted by the manufacturer in the 1940s to run on electricity. From time to time a part needs to be replaced, and repairs require a historic clock specialist. That's its current status, and Saline County Judge Jeff Arey believes the repairs will be completed soon.

The floor above the clock chamber is the belfry, with the bell connected to the clock to chime the hours ... when the clock is working. A shaft running down one corner of the tower from the belfry used to contain chains reaching to the judge's office to manually ring the bell, but the chains have since been removed and the hole in the judge's ceiling closed up.

In the first floor hallway of the courthouse, you'll find symbols of what makes Saline County unique. There's an exhibit of Niloak pottery, which was a high-quality pottery produced in Benton from local kaolin clays in the first half of the 20th century. Niloak is kaolin spelled backwards. It is known for its special "Mission swirl" pattern.

But the crown jewel is a 1942 painting called "The Bauxite Mines". Bauxite is an ore that yields aluminum, and during the 20th century, this region of Arkansas produced at least 90% of all bauxite mined in the U.S. This mural was painted by a University of Texas art professor from San Antonio, Julius Woeltz, and it was actually painted for the old Benton post office. It was commissioned in 1941 by the U.S. Treasury Section of Fine Arts as a program under the New Deal to put art in public spaces that celebrates Americans' history and work ethic. Since bauxite mining was one of Saline County's most significant industries, Woeltz chose to paint an open pit bauxite mine with workers drilling holes for dynamite and loading boxcars with ore. The background depicts the colorful geological strata that are revealed when the surface layers are stripped away. Ironically, a photo of Woeltz at work on this painting appeared in a paper on December 7th, 1941, the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. As America entered World War II, Saline County's bauxite mines took on an even greater strategic importance as the key source of aluminum needed for the war effort. This mural originally hung in the old Benton post office but was later moved to the Saline County Courthouse.

The Saline County Courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 for its architectural significance as a representative of the Romanesque Revival style in Arkansas, as well as for its local historic significance as the political and governmental center of Saline County. In 2008, it was also included on the National Register as a contributing property in the Benton Commercial Historic District. As such, it is the oldest building in the historic district. This majestic structure not only serves the needs of the county's citizens, it proudly represents what's good about Saline County and its contributions to Arkansas and the world.

Our 25th anniversary season continues in February with a tour of the Hinderliter House—also known as the Grog Shop—on the grounds of the Historic Arkansas Museum in downtown Little

Rock. It may be the oldest house in Little Rock, but due to its condition it's not currently open to the public. So join us next month for a virtual tour where we'll give you a peek inside!

For the rest of our upcoming 2022 program, please visit our website at ArkansasPreservation.com.

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