



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Sandwiching in History Tour

T. H. Dearing House

Newark

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By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Terry Shipman



*T. H. Dearing House
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2026*

Welcome and Introduction

Hello, everyone! My name is Ashley Sides, and I'm the preservation outreach coordinator at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the T. H. Dearing House, one of the most important Victorian-style structures in Independence County and one of the oldest buildings in Newark. We owe the privilege of being here today to the home's owner, Terry Shipman. He's been very gracious and generous to open up his home to us. It's his family's

legacy, and I think he's rightly proud of it. It's been in Shipman's family for over 130 years, and its significance reaches back beyond Newark's roots to a predecessor town called Akron.

The Demise of Akron and the Rise of Newark

The bottomlands south of Newark between the White River and the Black River have been settled for ages. In Arkansas' territorial era, White settlers from eastern states arrived and formed a community that came to be known as Big Bottom (later named Akron). The cemetery that they established in 1829 was on an old Indian mound that yielded archeological evidence of Native settlement going back to probably the 1500s. Settlers had long been drawn to this area.

Located on a slough along the White River, Big Bottom was well situated. In that earlier era, it made sense to tie the community's fortunes to the river. The river not only made the bottomlands fertile for agriculture; it was also a key channel for transport, driving commerce and prosperity via riverboat. Thanks to its position as a hub, Big Bottom gained a post office in 1854 and became a stagecoach stop on the route between Jacksonport and Batesville. As railroads began to cross the state, Big Bottom seemed well positioned to receive a station. In 1880, the Iron Mountain Railway surveyed a route and began planning a depot there. That same year, Big Bottom changed its name to Akron, possibly after the name of one of the railroad officials.

But Akron's advantageous location became its Achilles' heel, because the river had a habit of misbehaving. The frequent floods that kept the land fertile also caused repeated damage to property. A stagecoach might be able to adapt to the fluctuating conditions, but the railroad wanted a more reliable route. The Iron Mountain Railway ended up building their route on higher ground a couple of miles north of Akron, through a new town laid out in 1883 called Newark.

We've heard this story before. The railroads transformed how people and things moved around America, bringing fortune to strategically situated towns on their routes, but spelling doom for countless communities that got bypassed. That decade of the 1880s was when Akron's population reached its high-water mark.

Fleeing the floods and following the railroad, people started moving out of Akron. Many moved to Newark. Why is it called Newark? Maybe just because it was a new town in Arkansas. But tellingly, other theories hold that the name is a version of “New Akron,” or that its founder was like Noah in the Bible, building a “New Ark” to save Akron folks from the floods.

This exodus from Akron took place over time, but around the turn of the century, there wasn't much left of it, and it ceased to function as a community. When the business district burned, there was little incentive to rebuild. A handful of houses remained into the 1940s, but now all that's left of Akron is the old cemetery.

That, and this house.

One particular family in Akron, the Dearings, decided to take their house with them when they moved to Newark in 1901. It only had one story at that time, and they dismantled the whole thing, transported the pieces less than five miles to this spot, and reassembled it. So you are looking at one of the last links to the ghost town of Akron, a house that symbolizes the economic shift from river to rail transport.

Who was T. H. Dearing?

The man who brought this house to Newark had an interesting story of his own, so I want to take a moment to introduce you to him.

Thomas Hindman Dearing was born during the Civil War in 1864. He was named after Confederate Major General Thomas C. Hindman. Dearing's father was a farmer in St. Francis County who had been forced to join the Confederate army and, not wanting to fight, surrendered before being sent to battle. He died in a Federal prisoner of war camp in Illinois in 1865, so T. H. (Tom) Dearing never knew his father.

Around the age of eight, Tom was kidnapped. David Jones relates in the *Independence County Chronicle* that “one of his earliest memories, according to his daughter, was sitting in the chill twilight under a big tree with his hands clasped about his knees thinking he would surely freeze to death in the night, when suddenly out of nowhere, a man rode by and picked

him up.”¹ The Civil War had ravaged the land and the social fabric, and people were desperate in those postwar years. Children were expensive to feed, but they were useful for labor. According to Jones, “Dearing recalled being traded to one family for a ham, and to another for a shotgun.”² He did not remember his mother and thought of himself as an orphan.

Things got better for him, though. By age 16 he was in the home of a solid family in northern Independence County, working as a laborer.³ He was able to complete his education, attend college, and ultimately become certified to teach in 1886. He taught school for a few years and then moved to Akron in 1890 and married 17-year-old Mollie Floyd.

Tom Dearing farmed in the Big Bottom area around Akron. Every census lists his occupation as farmer, but he also got involved in politics and other forms of public service, as well as banking and real estate. Between 1894 and 1898 he served two terms as Independence County Circuit Clerk. Shortly after moving to Newark, he served briefly as an alderman and also got elected to the board of directors of the Bank of Newark. He was a leader in the city's Law and Order League, treasurer of the Newark Improvement Company, and a member of the Finance Committee of the Big Bottom Township Land Congress. He was a longtime Mason and served as secretary of the Newark Masonic Lodge. He was a leader in the Methodist Church and sang in the choir for many years. In 1912 he was elected to the Newark Board of Assessors, and over the years he served as treasurer for several other committees and groups. He often assisted the circuit clerk in the chancery court, and in 1926 and 1928 he was elected a justice of the peace in Big Bottom Township.

Dearing even served in state-level politics. In 1911, he had an appointment as sergeant at arms for the Arkansas State Senate and then went on to serve in four clerkships there. In 1915 he was elected outright to a term as State Senate sergeant at arms. He ran for state representative in 1930 but was defeated.

¹ David Jones, “The Dearing House: From the Life of T. H. Dearing to the Present,” *Independence County Chronicle*, January 2024, 13.

² Jones, “The Dearing House,” 13.

³ This is his status in the 1880 census. Dearing may have been with this family, the Hails, from an even younger age. In a 1912 *Newark Journal* article, he mentioned that he came to Independence County at the age of 12, but he didn't say with whom. See “Dearing Makes Emphatic Denial of Kennard Charges,” *Newark Journal*, March 22, 1912, 8.

Back in the late 1890s, when T. H. Dearing was a young man serving as Independence County Circuit Clerk in Batesville, he encountered a man there who told him there was fellow in Wynne, Arkansas, who looked so much like him that he could be his twin. Dearing traveled to Wynne to investigate, and this is how he discovered that he had an older brother named Pearce. The brothers quickly became close friends, and their families visited each other often. And through the connection, Tom was even able to meet his mother and find out about his past, shortly before she died.

The History of the House

Now that we know who T. H. Dearing was, let's tell the story of this house through the generations that it has served the Dearing family.

According to the *Independence County Chronicle*, this house was built in Akron and occupied by a man named Wyatt Fortenberry around 1886. But by 1894 it was owned by Thomas H. Dearing. This was in the twilight years of flood-prone Akron; the upstart railroad town of Newark had already been drawing people away for a decade by this point. The Dearings held out in Akron through the end of the decade. The turn of the twentieth century found Tom living there with his wife, Mollie, and children, William, Winnie, and James, ranging in ages from 8 years old down to 7 months. Mollie's mother also lived with them. And a young man working as a farm laborer boarded with them, too, which meant that four adults and three children called the one-story house home.

We don't know precisely what prompted T. H. Dearing and family to uproot and move to Newark, but a man of his ambitions probably preferred to be part of a growing city rather than a shrinking one. So it was probably only a matter of time before he joined the exodus from Akron and resettled in Newark.

And the timing was interesting. His wife, Mollie, died on March 15, 1901.⁴ Less than two weeks later, on March 27, 1901, Tom purchased Block 34 in Newark. He had the Akron house dismantled, transported a couple miles north, and reassembled on this property. According

⁴ You won't find her grave in the old Akron cemetery; she was actually buried in Batesville. See [Mollie A. Dearing \(1873-1901\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#).

to the family, the materials left over after rebuilding the house wouldn't fill a wheelbarrow. That November, Tom married Felicity McDoniel, known as Fleetie. So the year 1901 opened with T. H. Dearing married to Mollie and living in Akron. It closed with him married to Fleetie and living in Newark. A lot of change, but it was still the same house.

Remember, at this time, it was just a one-story house. And they kept packing more people into it. Mollie's mother continued living there to help with the children, even after her daughter died and Tom married Fleetie. By 1910, there were 11 people in the home: Tom, Fleetie, and the mother-in-law from the first marriage, seven children ranging in age from 18 years down to infancy. And they were also boarding a farm laborer.

They needed more room. So in 1913, Tom enlisted his brother Pearce to add a second story to the house. Pearce came up from Wynne at the end of August, and by mid-October, the work was finished. The local paper reported: "T. H. Dearing has just completed the addition of another story to his residence in the north part of town and now has one of the most beautiful and commodious homes in Newark."⁵

It was into this big family and newly expanded home that Tom and Fleetie Dearing's youngest daughter, Lena, was born in 1911. Lena was the mother of the current owner, Terry Shipman.

The home during these years was bursting with life, as you can imagine with so many inhabitants. The family hosted suppers and social events. They played music together and baseball in the big yard. Relatives dropped in from out of town.

There was plenty of drama. The Dearings' daughter Winnie, age 6, was shot in the arm by her brother, James, when he was target practicing with his rifle. James at this time was 3 ½. Two months later, a hatchet fell off a fence post and sliced poor Winnie's foot, requiring five stitches. At age 9, James fell out of a tree and broke his arm. The next year, 1910, Tom Dearing was injured when the horse pulling his buggy bolted and he was thrown into a barbed wire fence and badly injured his arm.

⁵ *Newark Journal*, October 14, 1913, quoted in Jones, "The Dearing House," 17. Other mentions of the construction work in the *Newark Journal* were made on August 8 and August 29, 1913.

Tom bought a car in 1916—a new Ford touring car. He was on the early tip of a wave of rapidly rising car ownership during those years. In 1916, only 1 in 114 Arkansans owned a car.⁶ Maybe a car would be safer than a horse? Just a few months later, James wrecked the new car. He was 16 and was driving six other siblings and friends on a joy ride. According to the newspaper, “when they reached a good stretch of road just on the outskirts of town, he speeded up a little too fast and lost control of the car. The machine turned completely over, throwing some of the occupants several feet.” Most passengers just ended up with bruises, but James’s adult brother, William, was pinned beneath the car, knocked unconscious, and sustained an injured back and badly bruised head and face. He was taken back here to his father’s house to recover. The car was badly damaged—broken windshield, wrecked top, and destroyed fenders.

In 1920, James was behind the wheel again and hit an 11-year-old boy who stepped out in front of him on the street. James honked and swerved but struck the boy, who was knocked to the ground and suffered a head injury.

Back to William—that was Tom’s oldest child. Terry Shipman knew him as Uncle Bill. Anyway, Bill got married in 1919 and moved to Jackson County, but after his wife divorced him in 1924, he moved back into his father’s home and lived here for pretty much the rest of his life.

The Depression years were hard. Tom lost his farm down in Big Bottom but fortunately was able to keep the house. He was injured when he fell off a hay wagon while hauling hay one day. This injury progressed into paralysis, and after two years of being bedridden, T. H. Dearing passed away on March 31, 1938, at the age of 73.

The 1940 census captured a much quieter home. Fleetie was now a 60-year-old widow. Her mother had moved into the home in her old age, and they were also boarding another 60-year-old widow. Bill, age 47, lived there too.

⁶ Based on 15,123 registered automobiles in 1916 for a state population of 1,719,000. See *Historical Review—Volume Two: Arkansas State Highway Commission and Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department* (Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department, 2004), 22; and U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Estimates of the Population for the U.S. and States, and for Puerto Rico.”

Fleetie passed away in 1948, and Bill may have been the sole resident in the home for many years. Relatives would come to visit. Lena had gotten married to Ewing Shipman and moved to Missouri, but she and her husband made visits to the old home every summer in the 1950s and 1960s.

Lena's son, Terry Shipman, who was born in 1950, remembered those early visits fondly. He remembered how the house embodied the simplicity of life in an earlier era—no indoor plumbing, water drawn from a well using a double-bucket system, a three-hole outhouse, and an old wood-burning cookstove in the kitchen. (It wasn't still in use but was a relic from before they got a gas stove in 1940.)

The observant young boy explored the big, mysterious old house and learned every detail. He ran his fingers through the grooves of the fluted door casings. He pondered the rosettes in the corners of the door and window casings. He noticed that the egg-and-dart molding of the fireplace mantel was the same as that on the staircase post. He even learned the secret way to climb up to the top of the roof. He knew this house intimately. This knowledge would come in handy decades later when Terry made the home his residence and decided to restore it to its original design.

Bill didn't change the house much. He added a kitchen sink and a washbasin after municipal water became available in 1958. And that was about it. But when Lena and Ewing Shipman retired and moved to the house in 1968 to live with her aging brother Bill, she felt the need to modernize. The first order of business was to install a proper bathroom with an indoor toilet.

Lena and Ewing lived here from 1968 until their deaths in 1992 and 1997 respectively. They left the exterior alone but made significant alterations to the interior, mostly on the first floor.

They removed all but one of the transoms above doors and dropped the ceiling from 12 feet to 8. They replaced original windows with aluminum and replaced original solid wood doors. They carpeted the floors. They converted the kitchen to a family room, converted the dining room into a kitchen, converted the bedroom to a dining room, and installed a pocket door to access the new kitchen (previously, there was no interior access; one had to use exterior doors to go to the kitchen and dining room). They removed the fireplaces, did away with old

cook stove (which was gathering dust, as it was no longer in use), and added a utility room at the back of the hallway under the stairs.

Celebrating the House

I'll have Terry tell you about his work to undo their remodeling in a moment, but first, I'll tell you about something special that happened while Lena and Ewing lived here. Even fifty years ago, this house was already old and historically significant. In 1976, it was publicly celebrated with a couple of prestigious honors.

First, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Now, you may know that moving a property from its original setting or significantly altering a property from its original design can render it ineligible for National Register listing. So you may be wondering about this house, which used to stand in Akron and only had one story. How did it qualify to be listed? Well, thankfully, the second story was built in a compatible style that didn't detract from the original design, and in this case, the original construction is not the main significance anyway. The nomination ties it to a historical trend, saying that "moving the house from a declining to a growing community represented the shift in population brought about by the railroad. The Dearing House, as the last surviving structure from Old Akron, is a continual reminder of Newark's heritage from the older community." And for that reason, the property's relocation is not a problem, it's the main reason for listing it!

That same year, 1976, was the United States Bicentennial. If you were at our last tour at Arkansas Post, you helped us dedicate a special historical marker on the occasion of the Semiquincentennial—well, they did the same thing 50 years ago to celebrate the Bicentennial. Communities applied for historical markers from the Arkansas American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration Committee. Independence County chose seven significant sites to mark, and the Dearing House was one of them. This 50-year-old marker looks as fresh today as it did in 1976, because just a couple of years ago they had it refurbished at the foundry that made it.

Terry Shipman's Experience with the House

Terry Shipman retired in 2012 and moved into this house at that time. He has made it his mission in retirement to restore this house back to something like the way he remembered it as a child. I'm sure he'll keep the bathroom, though.

And with that, I'm going to turn it over to Terry and let him tell you about the work that he has invested into the historic preservation of this special place.

[Terry's presentation]...

Conclusion

The house you see today holds together different stories: It tells of the demise of Akron and river traffic, and of the rise of Newark and rail traffic. And it reflects the do-it-yourself spirit of adapting the home for the changing needs of generations of Dearings and their descendants. When opportunity shifted, the house was taken apart, moved, and rebuilt. When the family outgrew it, a second floor was added. When the trend of the day was modernization, amenities were added and the living spaces were altered. In this era when historic preservation is more appreciated, those alterations are being reversed. The Dearing House has served its occupants' needs through different eras and stands as a testament to all those layers of history.

Now you are welcome to look around inside the home. Please stay on the first floor; the upstairs is not part of the tour.

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