



Sandwiching in History Tour

Historic Downtown Conway

Centered on Front and Oak Streets

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By: Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Kim Williams



Meet at Simon Park around the Kris Allen Stage pavilion.

Hello! Welcome to Sandwiching in History! I'm Ashley Sides, the Preservation Outreach Coordinator with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Today's tour focuses on the Conway Commercial Historic District. The historic buildings of downtown are full of stories, so we will hear a few of them and learn about the origin and development of Conway. This is a walking tour—we will be walking through some of the blocks of downtown—and it may take the better part of an hour.

I want to thank Kim Williams of Conway Downtown Partnership for her help with today's program. I've also benefited from information published by the Faulkner County Historical Society, the Faulkner County Museum, and others. This tour does not contain any original research by myself; they are the real authorities, so if you want to go deeper than what we can today, I invite you to reach out to those groups especially: the Faulkner County Museum,

Faulkner County Historical Society, and Conway Downtown Partnership. Much of this tour is based on the National Register of Historic Places nominations for the historic district and two individually listed buildings.

I'll start the story while we're standing here by the railroad tracks, because this is where Conway began.

Before the 1870s, this site was essentially open country. There had been an important settlement at Cadron, at the bend of the Arkansas River six miles west of here, much earlier, during the territorial era. For a brief time in 1820, Cadron had been in the running to become the new territorial capital of Arkansas. But Little Rock was chosen, and Cadron eventually faded away.

Conway County, created in 1825, originally covered a large swath of northern central Arkansas, including most of what is today Faulkner, White, Cleburne, Van Buren, Perry, part of Yell, and Conway counties. Besides Cadron, there were a few other settlements in the broader area before the Civil War: Palarm, Greenbrier, Enola, Mount Vernon. But right here, prior to the 1870s, there was just wilderness—scenic, open prairie interspersed with trees.

In 1870, the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad was being built to connect those two cities, under the leadership of Chief Engineer Colonel Asa P. Robinson. The railroad ran right through here because it had to pass through Cadron Gap. A depot was built at this spot—right there where Main Street is now—and the railroad deeded a square mile of land around it to Colonel Robinson in 1871 for his services.

Robinson knew this site had potential as a regional market and transportation hub for agricultural products from the area. Cotton was a major crop, but it wasn't very convenient getting it to the nearest markets in places like Little Rock or Searcy. Before the railroad, travel was over rough terrain by wagon or by creeks and rivers where navigable. A rail depot here would draw trade from the entire region.

So Robinson platted out a townsite around the depot, which was known by the name of Conway Station. The name was likely in reference to the name of the county it was a part of at the time, or the important Arkansas political family with that name, or perhaps to a locomotive named "Conway."

Robinson aligned the streets with the railroad, which is why the downtown street grid is skewed, not laid out north and south / east and west like the later sections of the city. He started selling lots around the depot, and the settlement began growing. Its future was assured when, in 1873, Faulkner County was created, being carved out of parts of Conway and Pulaski Counties, and the little settlement of Conway Station was named the county seat. It was two years later, in 1875, that Conway Station actually incorporated as the town of Conway.

At least one of the early settlers had been part of the railroad construction crew, and seeing opportunity here, he stayed. Max Frauenthal was a German immigrant who set up a little wooden mercantile shop in 1872—only the second store in Conway Station. Robinson had originally intended the main commercial center of the town to be Main Street and Railroad Street (what is now Parkway). Businesses were meant to face the railroad on both sides of the tracks. There was no Front Street at first. But as the story goes, Max Frauenthal decided not to put his store there on the main business strip, but rather to locate in an alley over here behind the depot. This is where farmers coming to town would park their wagons, and Frauenthal would get their business first. It must have worked. Frauenthal's business boomed, and Front Street ended up being the commercial hub along with Oak Street, instead of Railroad and Main.

The first buildings in the commercial district were wood frame structures. In 1878, a fire destroyed most of the district and all of the original frame buildings were lost. Max Frauenthal replaced his lost store with a new, two-story brick building—the first in Conway. That 1879 Max Frauenthal building—or at least a portion of it—still stands at 904 Front Street. The store also featured the first plate-glass window in Conway.

This American Management Corporation building at 824 Front also dates back to 1879, although in a different form, and it is also associated with Frauenthal. Max Frauenthal partnered with his brother Jo Frauenthal and cousin Leo Schwarz and built a hugely successful business selling farming supplies on credit and acquiring farmers' capital when they couldn't repay loans. By 1883, M. and J. Frauenthal & Co. was the largest mercantile store in the county. In 1892, Max sold his part of the business to Jo Frauenthal and Leo Schwarz. The original building here also belonged to the Frauenthal and Schwarz company. But what we see today is a ca. 1925 incarnation of the Frauenthal and Schwarz Building, when they expanded and remodeled it. The architecture firm Sanders & Ginocchio joined it with an adjacent one-story building to create a huge new building with a completely new façade. The design emphasizes function rather than style, but it does include Mediterranean touches, such as the flattened Italianate brackets. It became the first of its style in Conway and set the standard for future commercial buildings. As such, this Frauenthal and Schwarz Building was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. The second-story windows were originally composed of sixteen bays of six-within-nineteen pane windows, with transoms of prism glass, but now they have been reconfigured into twenty-four bays, each with eighteen panes, and the transoms now correspond with the window bays beneath them and have fifty-four panes per section, but the building still retains the overall look of the 1925 remodel.

There are 127 buildings in the downtown commercial historic district. This district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010 with local significance for its association with early development in Conway and also for its variety and quality of nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial buildings. The district has just been resurveyed. A few buildings had been lost, some that had not been contributing properties have been restored in a way that now they are contributing, and a few others that had been contributing in the past have been altered enough to no longer be contributing.

What does it mean to be “contributing” or “noncontributing”? In order to have a historic district, you need to have historic buildings, of course. At least 50% or more of the buildings in the district need to be contributing properties. That means the buildings still convey the original historic associations. For whatever reason the district is considered historic—it could be for its association with some specific aspect of history, or it could be for a certain style of architecture or something like that—in order to contribute to the historic significance of the district, a building needs to actually embody that quality. Some buildings don't because they may be modern replacements of historic buildings. Or they may have been altered so substantially that they no longer convey the historic character that the district is significant for, and so they would be noncontributing. In this tour, we will be looking at buildings that tell important parts of the story of the history of downtown Conway, which will lead us mostly to contributing properties.

Having this historic district has helped Conway revitalize the downtown. Financial incentives like historic restoration tax credits and grants are available from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, and the Main Street Arkansas program also provides a lot of grant money and design consultation to help small businesses renovate their historic buildings.

Another thing the Conway Downtown Partnership is coordinating to highlight the history of the downtown district in a way that will also heighten its tourism appeal is an art project called Tiny Toads. They got a Public Art Grant from the Division of Arkansas Heritage for Main Street Programs, which is funding the creation of ten or so small sculptures of toads doing historic activities associated with the historic buildings they're associated with. So, for example, there will be a Tiny Toad sculpture for the Frauenthal and Schwarz Building. (It'll be a toad shopkeeper with some of his wares from his mercantile shop.)

We're going to walk a few streets and see a few of these buildings in the district to get a sense of the scope of the history and architecture that's represented here.

If you can't stick with us for the full tour, feel free to leave whenever you need to. We are recording it and planning to post it online for viewing at a later time.

Walk to Oak and turn left, cross tracks and pause at District Court parking lot

The building at 827-831 Parkway on the corner of Parkway and Oak is the Donaghey Building, ca. 1905. George W. Donaghey was a carpenter and building contractor who had a huge impact on Conway. This was one of multiple buildings he built in town, and he also played an instrumental role in bringing three colleges to Conway: Central Collegiate Institute (now Hendrix), Arkansas State Normal School (now UCA), and Central College for Women (where Central Baptist College is now). Donaghey of course later went on to become the twenty-second governor of Arkansas between 1909 and 1913.

The Donaghey Building had been a contributing property in the historic district, but in 2022 resurvey, it no longer is.

The building at 1316 Oak dates to about 1905 and is a typical one-story early twentieth-century commercial building. It originally housed the Conway Printing Company, but by 1930, it was home to the *Log Cabin Democrat* newspaper. (*Contributing*)

Over here at 1304 Oak Street is a unique 1910 building with Gothic Revival influence. The façade of this one-story brick building has battlements at the top of the parapet and elaborate brick corbeling between the battlements and the transoms. In 1921, this building became the Goad Brothers Café and Bakery. Luke Goad ran the kitchen and Jud Goad ran the bakery. It was open 24/7 and was one of Conway's most popular restaurants for 36 years until it closed about 1957. (*Contributing*)

Tiny Toad: Toad versions of Luke and Jud Goad holding a giant cookie they've baked.

Cross back over tracks and return to Front Street, turn north on Front, pause at sidewalk by Centennial Bank parking lot

While we're here, we can take a closer look at the Max Frauenthal building at 904 Front Street. This is the one Frauenthal built after the 1878 fire, making it the oldest building in the historic district and the first brick building in the city. It is a two-story building with Italianate influence that features a deep trim band with large eave brackets below at the cornice line and segmental arched paired windows at the second floor. The earliest Sanborn maps show it being a drug store, but in 1930 it was the Main Café. (*Contributing*)

For the first nearly twenty years, Conway residents had to do their banking in Little Rock, until the Bank of Conway was founded in 1890. It was the first bank in the city, and this was its building at 908 Front Street. It was one of George Donaghey's first large building commissions, and it was built in the late Gothic Revival style, with a cut stone façade, arched windows, an arched stone entrance, and a battlement at the north end. The current plain brick façade replaced the original one around 1985. And yet it went from not contributing in the historic district in 2010 to contributing in the 2022 resurvey.

Cross to east side of Front and walk north, stop just before Van Ronkle

These buildings at 917-923 Front Street were constructed about 1900. They were originally the Floyd Cummins Furniture Store, and it included both the two-story south part and the one-story north part of the building. The south part is a great example of the Italianate Style, with a deep trim band at the cornice line with four large eave brackets, brick soldier courses, and a central balcony with arched transoms over the door and sidelights. (*Contributing*)

Look across Van Ronkle Street to the north. This was originally the Farmer's State Bank Building. Farmer's State Bank was founded in 1912. It was the third bank in Conway. In 1918, this building was built for it, designed in the Classical Revival Style by architects Thompson and Harding. It is the only other building in the historic district that is also individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places, having been listed in 1982. According to the nomination

form, it is the most formal and imposing of Thompson and Harding's several Neo-Classical designs for small-town banks. It has four massive stone Tuscan engaged columns on the front elevation, and you can see the inscription "Farmers State Bank" along with two laurel wreaths on the stone parapet. Farmers State Bank, along with the Bank of Conway and the other bank in town, went under during the Great Depression. Banks have always occupied this building; it is currently home to First Security Bank.

Tiny Toad: A rich toad carrying a bag of money to the bank.

Take a few steps north

These buildings at 1017-1019 Front Street were built around 1900, and despite their different appearances, they actually belonged together. They were the Layman Hotel. The street level had storefronts, and the second floor had hotel rooms. In the original historic district listing, both buildings were contributing properties, but with the latest survey the south building is noncontributing.

Turn around (or briefly step to other side of Front) to look at:

Behind you is the historic Smith Ford Showroom at 1020 Front Street. Smith Ford was founded in 1916 and is the oldest car dealership in Conway. They moved into this building in 1923. This two-story brick building is the only Art Deco-style building. Some of the notable architectural features are the brick work on the parapet and the half-octagon overhang. There were once two gas pumps here as well. (*Contributing*)

Tiny Toad: A toad driving a 1923 Model T Ford.

Adjacent to the Smith Ford Showroom was the Conway Theater, where there's just an empty hole in the buildings now. The Smith family who owned the Ford dealership also owned the movie theater. This was the front entrance, and the main part of the theater angled off to the left behind the Ford building. The separate "colored entrance" was at the back of the building, as I understand.

Return down Front Street to Van Ronkle; go left (east) on Van Ronkle to Markham; take a couple steps north on Markham to see the old gin

This was an industrial area. Over there at 1016 Markham you see what remains of the old Enderlin and Seiter cotton gin. It's not technically in the historic district, but I wanted to point it out because cotton has been so fundamental to Conway's commercial history. In this vicinity were storage areas for cotton bales, a wagon yard, a mule barn for stabling your animal when you brought cotton to the gin for example, and livestock auction stockyards and a farmer's market on the northwest corner. This was bus stop corner, because buses from out of town would stop here.

Cross Van Ronkle and come south on Chestnut; pause at the south end of the roundabout and look ahead down Chestnut to the south

The building ahead of us at the northeast corner of Oak and Chestnut, 1022 Oak, was built around 1915 and housed John Grummer’s hardware store and Adalbert Lachowsky’s tin shop. It still says “Grummer Hardware Co.” in the floor tiles at the front entrance, which you can see as we walk by in a moment. In 1942, Walter Massey took over the hardware store and changed the name to Massey Hardware. He only ran the shop about six years, and it had different owners in the decades after that, but it continued to be known as Massey Hardware up until it closed in 1998. *(Contributing)*

Tiny Toad: A toad struggling with a large hammer.

You can see that this building where Squizito is is an addition on to the back of Massey Hardware. It was used for storage for the hardware store. It’s been renovated with the help of a tax credit from the AHPP.

Continue south to Oak Street; step a few paces to the right (west) to see the end of the block

Look to the west toward the end of the block. There are two matching buildings—one two-story and one three-story. The two-story building at 1113-1115 Oak Street was the Central Meat Market Building, built around 1910. It is a brick building with a façade of ceramic glazed brick. Like many other buildings in the district, it shows Italianate influence and has a wide overhanging eave boxed with large eave brackets and a deep trim band with dentils. Its rectangular windows are set into recessed brick panels on the second floor’s front façade, while the windows on the east elevation are arched with brick hooding. *(Contributing)*

The taller building next door at 1117 Oak is the ca. 1915 Halter Building. It was built with the same façade features as the Central Meat Market Building but includes a third floor with arched windows set into recessed panels. Its upper floors have housed several offices over the years, and the ground floor was known as the home of Greeson’s Drug Store until 1966. *(Contributing)*

Tiny Toad: Two toads swing dancing.

At the southeast corner of Oak and Chestnut is the Kordsmeier Furniture Building (1021-1023 Oak). I don’t have the date the building was built, but Kordsmeier moved into it in 1956. They operated out of that building until 2017. The building’s owner has been able to take advantage of tax credits for renovations.

Continue south on Chestnut

The building at 812 Chestnut Street was the ca. 1930 Central Arkansas Funeral Service Building. As you can see, it represents a different architectural style and era than most of the other buildings in the district. It is a one-story standard commercial building that was constructed around 1930 using mixed masonry with field stone walls and brick quoining at the corners of the building, the windows, and the door. *(Contributing)*

Turn right (west) on Main and go back to Front Street

The building here on the northeast corner of Main and Front (802 Front Street) was the Harton Service Station Building, built around 1920. With the recessed porch closed off, you might not immediately realize it was a service station. (This is a recent development, though, so many of you will remember it the way it was before.) But when you look closer, you see that the front half of this building is supported by two large brick columns on the south elevation and a diagonal storefront at the back of the recessed porch. There were gas pumps under the porch roof, and cars could drive through. (*Contributing*)

One more building I might mention while we are here is the one at the southwest corner of Oak and Front Streets, at the end of Simon Park (the building with the mural on it). It represents a more recent era in the historic period of this district. It was built in 1960 as the First State Bank Building. It has a two-story L-shaped main section built of Roman bricks and a one-story steel-framed section with granite paneling and large windows. As it was built, it represented typical mid-century commercial architecture with modern influences including the flat roof, flat porch roofs, and Roman brick. But it has undergone such a facelift that it really presents a contemporary look now. It is a non-contributing building in the district. City Hall used it for many years until they recently moved a block away to the southeast corner of Front and Main.

Return to Simon Park to wrap up

As with many city centers around the country, Conway's commercial downtown experienced a decline over the course of the latter half of the 20th century as businesses moved out and buildings were not kept up. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a concerted effort began to be made to save the historic downtown and revitalize the city's core. The Conway Downtown Partnership was formed for this purpose, and the designation of the Conway Commercial Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places in 2010 helped provide access to additional sources of funding. This is why the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program and our Main Street Arkansas Program do what we do. We love to partner with communities to help preserve their historic structures so they can keep the ties to their rich past, cultivate community pride in their heritage, and build on it for a rich, bright future.

Thanks for joining us today, and I hope the history of downtown Conway enriches your experience of this great city.

For more information about the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, check out ArkansasPreservation.com.

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