



Sandwiching in History Tour

Historic Johnson Farm

3150 West Pear Lane, Fayetteville

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The Benjamin Franklin Johnson II Homestead District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2019 as an intact example of an early 20th century Northwest Arkansas homestead. This is extremely important at this point because the retention of the family home, outbuildings and associated farmland gives the modern visitor a very evocative picture of the historic rural landscape. This is quickly being replaced with subdivisions and commercial development.

The homestead also played a role in the prominent fruit industry of the region. Although the boom years for fruit orchards were essentially over by the 1930s the Johnson farm was still maintained as a working orchard, producing pears and apples past 1968. The fact that this wonderful place is still here gives us all the vicarious experience of life on the farm.

The layers of history here are invaluable, and I don't have time to go into all of them, so I suggest you read Amanda's article in the Winter 2018 and Spring 2019 *Flashback*, Journal of the Washington County Historical Society.

If you are interested in visiting the National Register listed Rieff's Chapel Cemetery across the road, feel free. There is a great signboard up there that gives some of the history of the cemetery and the community. The Rieffs were very much a part of the history of the farm.

This area was known as Rieff's Chapel Community. It was given this name because the 80-acre Rieff farm was located on what became the Johnson Homestead. In 1860 a report from the *Arkansas Geologist* referred to Rieff's Mountain south of Kessler Mountain.

The Rieff's Chapel Cemetery west of the house was situated on one acre of land donated by John Rieff and one additional acre was donated by Rieff in 1869 for school district #12. The Rieff's Chapel school and church was built to the north of the homestead.

So, this gives you an idea of the environment of the area. You're looking at it now as an isolated rural area, and it may feel to a modern visitor that it's out of context with the current environment, but the road to the north of the house was a thoroughfare that went north all the way over to Cato Road. Farmers, schoolchildren, and travelers would have been using this road to get to school and Fayetteville as well as other cities, much like we do on the highways of today.

Washington County was initially a draw for hunters and fishermen in the 19th century, but agriculture evolved to become the main income source a few decades later. The advent of horticultural experiments with Arkansas apples began around the time of statehood.

During the Civil War crops were destroyed and sequestered by troops from both sides so farmers had to start over after the war. By the 1880s fruit crops had recovered enough to take advantage of the new St. Louis-San Francisco Railway through the county. Thousands of acres were planted in fruit and experimental agriculture and horticulture education was expanded. In the late 19th century Northwest Arkansas became known as the Ozark Fruit Belt because of the great success of apples, strawberries, grapes, pears, and blackberries.

The Johnson family were examples of the type of small-scale fruit farmer that could be found throughout Washington County at the apex of the fruit industry. They were among a number of 19th and early-20th century residents of the current property, which was used for the production of fruit prior to their residency.

Farming had occurred on the property since the 1820s and the Rieffs purchased the land in 1838. John Rieff died in 1870 and the land was sold out of the family.

there were several owners, renters, and mortgagees through the years until Henry Ucker, Sr., and Regina Ucker bought the 80 acres in 1891. One thousand-eight hundred pear trees were planted by the Uckers in 1895. The farm was sold in 1905 to Henry's brothers Andrew and William, and William's wife Mary.

Here is where the Johnsons come into the picture. Benjamin and Martha Johnson moved to Arkansas territory in 1828. Benjamin's brother James and his family moved to Washington County in 1851. So, that is where the Arkansas history begins. The Johnson Community was named for the family and the Benjamin Franklin Johnson I House, and the Johnson House and Mill are listed on the National Register, as well as the Johnson Barn here on the property.

There was a long line of Benjamin Franklins, so for expediency's sake the family took to calling them B I, B II, B III, and B 4.

Benjamin Johnson II was born in Washington County, but by the late 1800s he and his wife Rachel owned and operated the B.F. Johnson Cash Store in Everton, MO. One of the Ucker family members who

was working as a traveling salesman came to the store and noticed some pears on the counter. He mentioned to Benjamin that he had an orchard in Arkansas for sale.

The Johnsons worked out a deal, swapping their store for the 80-acre pear orchard. Benjamin II, Rachel, and their children loaded up their cows and beehives into a boxcar and headed to Arkansas by train.

When they arrived at the farm in 1908, they initially lived in the Uckers' existing farmhouse on the site of the current house. The Uckers did not build that house, and they don't know who did, or when it was built.

Johnson Family

There were a lot of Johnson family members here on the farm. The children included Eva, Lenora, Frederick, Wilton, Arthur, and Benjamin III.

Benjamin II's wife, Rachel Elizabeth Divelbiss was from Washington County. She was a schoolteacher in the late 1800s. B II saw her riding a mule, fell in love and they married in 1885.

Wayne and Wilton Johnson enlisted in the Marines in 1917. Wilton and Wayne enlisted in the Navy the same day, but they were not aware of it until later. Prior to the war Wayne was a railway mail clerk. He was killed in the war in 1918.

Besides the brothers enlisting, their two mules, Bird and Belle were shipped overseas to serve as war mules. In a letter to his family in 1918 Wilton wrote that he had seen Bird close to the front. It's not known what happened to Belle.

Wilton received a B.A. and a B.S. from southwest Missouri State Teachers College after WWI and a Ph.D. in education from the University of Oklahoma, Norman. He lived in Norman until his death in 1966.

Arthur traveled extensively in his youth but returned to Arkansas where he raised white-faced Hereford cattle. He assisted in managing the Johnson farm, seeing to the orchards and crops until he died in 1974.

Eva and Lenora were both educated women. Eva graduated from the Fayetteville Business College in 1912, earned her B.A. from Missouri State Normal School in Springfield in 1920, and completed her master's in business at Columbia University, New York in 1924.

Lenora received a teacher's certificate from the University of Arkansas summer school and received her Bachelors' degree from Missouri State Normal School, Springfield, in 1916, and a master's in education from the University of Missouri, Columbia, in 1918. Lenora was a graduate student at Chicago University in 1918 and completed all but her dissertation for a Ph.D. in Education from Columbia, New York. She taught at teacher's colleges in Virginia and Louisiana before coming back to the farm.

Eva and B II invested in oil fields in Seminole, Oklahoma, which were the largest suppliers of oil in the world by 1935. The sisters bought land around Fayetteville and offered loans to college students and farmers. This enabled them to travel the world in the 1920s. The two sisters also traveled the world in the 1920s. They visited Japan, India, Egypt, Palestine, Constantinople, Athens and the Greek Islands, Venice, and Europe.

In later years they lived in the farmhouse while Arthur managed it. They all worked together to maintain the farm and canning.

I'm going to go into Benjamin III a little later.

Anne Johnson Dallett Prichard was living in Canada until her mother's death in 1984 when she came back to the Johnson Farm to take care of her father, B III. Anne maintained the estate and with her

brother was the driving force behind keeping the farm intact and in the family. A task she continues today.

Anne obtained a B.A. from Mills College and an MLS in Library Science at the University of California, Berkely. She worked as a reference librarian at the Fayetteville Public Library and reading room supervisor in Special Collections at the University of AR, Fayetteville.

Anne and her son Timothy – she did not name him Benjamin - set up a conservation easement with the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust on part of the property. Although she doesn't live at the farm fulltime now, she is very involved in its preservation.

Her brother, Benjamin IV served in Korea and later with the Arkansas National Guard Helicopter Rescue Unit. While he was serving with the National Guard, he became aware of the sprawl around Fayetteville and specifically around the farm. The construction of U.S. 49 was threatening the farm.

B IV became a member of the Ozark Regional Land Trust, and he donated tracts of land to the organization to protect the farm. In keeping with the family history, he planted a pear orchard of 14 varieties and apples. Some of the trees still produce fruit.

House

The Craftsman house you see today was built in 1925 and it was built around the original home using solid black walnut posts. While it was under construction, elements of the earlier home were thrown out the windows. B III drew a rudimentary map of the layout of the original home.

Rachel and Benjamin took into consideration how the house would fit the site, the direction of the setting and rising sun and the prevailing winds.

The house is primarily intact from 1925. The Craftsman belcast porch supports on piers, open rafter tails, knee braces on the gable ends, and hipped roof dormer are all original. The siding, and double-hung windows are original as well.

This small room to the right of the porch was built as a room for B II to take naps. The windows on all sides made it cool and breezy. It was called the bird's nest. In later years Anne had shelving installed for her children's book collection and it was then known as the book nook.

The stones on the walk leading to the porch came from the town square in Fayetteville. They were collected when the city replaced the paving stones from the sidewalks but were stored near the sweet potatoes until the 1980s when B IV built the walk.

I'm sure you noticed the stacked rock wall lining the drive to the house – as the house was being constructed the family borrowed from the wall to build the foundation of the house and the current barn, so there are some intermittent gaps in the walls.

The rear elevation features a basement-level garage. During the construction of the house, the family raised the rear elevation an additional three feet with jacks and scooped out the dirt to build the basement.

The only alterations to the exterior are at the rear of the house on a small, enclosed porch. It was originally screened-in but now is enclosed with glass windows. There are minimal changes to the interior, which the folks inside will tell you about. We'll meet back here and head to the barn.

Barn

Historically, the Johnson Farm had several outbuildings besides the ones existing today. The diaries, and receipts retained by the Johnson family gave a tremendous amount of information on the construction and use of these buildings as well as the day-to-day work on the farm.

The structures that are no longer standing are an evaporator shed, workhouse, feed lean-to, privies, wood fences, sorting shed, caviary, for raising guinea pigs, and a smokehouse.

There was an earlier barn at the farm in the general area of the current barn. that barn was not built by the Johnsons, and it is not known how old it was or who built it. Rachel wrote about a shed for feed being added to that building in a 1915 letter to her son, Frederick. The barn was a single-crib central drive structure with gable roof and vertical siding.

In 1933 the original barn collapsed during a snowstorm. B III and his brother Arthur traveled around Northwest Arkansas making sketches and looking at barns to come up with the most efficient design for the family. Record books for the farm note that there were 14 laborers, but only one has been identified. Efton Bohannon of Greenland was listed as a hired hand in the mid-1930s, and he is buried at the Rieff's Chapel Cemetery.

The barn was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990 and is balloon frame construction, which means that long vertical studs extend from the foundation to the roof.

It is a side drive plan on stone foundation with beveled siding. The gable-roofed hayhood features a hinged triangular flap that is raised and lowered with a rope and pully system. Be sure to take a look at the gaps in the rock wall up the hill to see where the stones for the barn foundation came from.

There is a water tank to the side of the barn that collects rainwater from the gutters. If you walk around the back of the barn there is a 1940s-era Dodge car and a few items of farming equipment belonging to the Johnsons.

Foundations

These stone foundations you see here are the remains of the 1914 sorting shed built by B II, his son Wilton, and a local mason. It was a two-story structure built to store sweet potatoes and apples. There were no interior stairs because it was built into the hillside, so there was exterior access to both levels.

Apples were sorted on the upper level and sweet potatoes were stored on the lower level. The sorting shed survived until the 1940s when it was destroyed by fire, which was the result of cooking a ham in a metal barrel.

Pond/Springhouse

The pond, fed by Cato Spring was built in 1989 by Anne, but it offered information on the layers of history at the farm. During excavation artifacts and stains were discovered and the Arkansas Archeological Survey was notified.

Archeologists found historic ceramics, glass, and prehistoric flakes. They conjectured that the historic items were fill materials dumped in the mid-to-late-19th century to elevate the ponded banks for erosion reduction and bank stabilization.

The springhouse, used to keep butter and milk cool, once had a red terra cotta tile roof. The family does not know when it was built, but it was here when Anne was a child, so it dates at least to the 1940s. A

1986 interview with Harold Cate, who was 73 at the time stated that he couldn't remember when the spring house was not there.

Dam

While the workman was digging the pond, he found a rubbled rock wall in the treeline at the south of the pond. It was likely used as a dam in the mid-to-late 19th century to pond the spring. The presence of the ceramics and the dam tell us that the current pond is the second to have been built in this location. B III wrote that it was on site when the family moved there.

Rock Retaining Wall

This mortared rock retaining wall constructed in 1931 was built by Benjamin III. B III attended school at the Rieff's Chapel schoolhouse and graduated from Southwest Missouri State Teachers College in 1926, then attended Harvard University, graduating in 1930 with a master's in landscape architecture.

He studied planning and development of Mediterranean cities in Europe and Egypt from 1930 to 1931. From 1931 to 1933 he lived at the farm, so we see his several of his contributions on the landscape. In 1933 he moved to New York and worked as an assistant landscape architect. He married Anne's mother Lilie in 1934 who was instrumental in the retention of Johnson papers and artifacts.

B III and his family moved to Houston, Texas, in 1937 where he designed housing developments and did grounds planning. In 1943, he was named city planning engineer for the City of Houston. In 1965 he returned to the Johnson farm where he continued the family tradition of pear farming.

Workhouse Foundation

This stone foundation is a remnant of a circa 1914 workhouse or toolshed. The shed extended underground, and the cellar is lined with stacked thin cut stones. B III had the workhouse removed in 1965 because it was obstructing the view from the back windows.

Pergola

This 56-foot pergola was also built by B III in 1931. Originally there was a caviary for raising guinea pigs and a 1914 smokehouse in this area. Wisteria and grape vines are supported by unpeeled tree limbs. As the tree limbs rot, the family takes care to put up the same type of supports. There is an adjoining rock wall extending west, which is also attributed to B III. The rock wall with steps at the south side of the house was also built by B III.

Chicken House

The chicken house was built by B II on the site of a previous chicken coop after 1925. There is no original shelving inside the building, but the original shelves are stored in the barn.

Cistern

Notice the stone and concrete cylinder by the house. This held a 1930s cistern for rainwater to be funneled from the house gutters to two zinc tubs located in the basement. Anne's plan currently is to move the water tank from the barn back here to the house.

Overview

Now, from this viewshed look to the east and imagine those hills being covered in orchards – the important money maker for the family. Even the front yard had trees covering it. The Johnsons were selling apples, peaches, and pears. Family diaries mention planting corn and picking cherries. They also raised strawberries, cantaloupes, watermelon, sweet potatoes, oats, blackberries, and peas.

B II also mentioned a garden that was probably a kitchen garden that yielded onions, lettuce, radishes, and new potatoes. There is photo documentation of a garden to the south of the house. Livestock included chickens, milk cows, beef cattle, guinea pigs, horses, and mules.

The girls joined the boys and their parents in plowing and planting. Everyone worked. Lenora wrote that she didn't have time to write letters because of her work on the farm and sometimes she would fall asleep at the table.

After B III retired to the farm he would sell pears from the front porch, or at county fairs and farmer's markets in Washington County. He would put up signs on Cato Springs Road and people would drive up to the front porch where he would sell them pears.

So every one of the family members connected to the Johnson Farm have worked to maintain its integrity and character as a farming commune. The people who help Anne here at the farm happily take part in continuing that work.

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