



Sandwiching in History Tour

La Petite Roche (The “Little Rock”)

Riverfront Park at the Junction Bridge, Little Rock

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It’s April 1722. French explorer Jean-Baptiste Bénard de La Harpe is paddling a Native American pirogue up the Arkansas River on a reconnaissance mission deep in the heart of France’s colonial claims in North America.

On April 9th, La Harpe’s expedition reached the first rocks jutting out of the banks of the Arkansas River since they set out from the Gulf of Mexico some months earlier: This point of rocks on the south bank and the much larger promontory three miles upstream called the Big Rock.

Welcome to Sandwiching in History. I’m Ashley Sides, and this is the original “Little Rock.”

La Harpe didn't call it that. In his journal, he just wrote, "The 9th, having advanced a league, we found rocks sticking out of the ground [perhaps an allusion to the Little Rock], and having reached a league above the rock, which is on the right of the river; we named it the French Rock," that is, "le Rocher Français."

That would be the Big Rock. The French also called it "le Grand Rocher." The Quapaws that La Harpe had consulted for directions had pointed it out to him as a landmark for navigation and for trade. La Harpe also thought it could make a good stone quarry, and of course it later did.

But when it comes to the "Little Rock," you need to imagine it much bigger. The outcropping that La Harpe passed on the south bank on that April day in 1722 was larger than what we see today, because in the nineteenth century much of the original landmark was blasted away in the name of progress.

Why do the banks of the Arkansas suddenly get rocky at this point after hundreds of miles of low shorelines all the way downriver to the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico? It's at this point where the lowlands of the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain and the Gulf Coastal Plain meet the interior highlands at the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains. These exposed rocks are Jackfork Sandstone and are some 300 million years old.

La Harpe recommended establishing a trading post here where the rocks meet the river. No permanent post or settlement was set up in the 18th century under the French or Spanish, but the rocks remained important landmarks. Throughout the colonial period, the French referred to this smaller outcropping on the south bank as "le Petit Rocher"—the Little Rock—to distinguish it from Le Grand Rocher. It first appeared on a map in 1799. When the United States bought the territory in the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans commonly used the English translation. In a letter written in 1805, John Treat explains that the bank "being stoney along the River side has caus'd its being named the Little Rocks." Another common term was the Point of Rocks.

American settlers began to move into Louisiana Territory, many coming through Arkansas up the Arkansas River or down the Southwest Trail. This route skirted the eastern edge of the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains on its way to Texas. The Southwest Trail crossed the Arkansas River at the Little Rock. The river could be forded at that spot, and the natural harbor formed by the projecting rock made it a good place for riverboats to dock. When settlement began at that location, ferry services were also established at the Point of Rocks.

Quapaws were native to the area south of the river, but as whites began to settle on the land, the U.S. government restricted the Quapaws to a reservation, with the western boundary formed by a line running south from the Point of Rocks. This was known as the Quapaw Line. White settlements began to cluster near the Little Rock right up to the edge of the Quapaw Line.

Although there were still just a handful of settlers at the Little Rock before 1820, it was clear that this site held promise for growth. Not only was it at the crossroads of the two primary routes through the territory, its position atop a high bank over the river protected it from floods. Moreover, it was geographically in the center of Arkansas Territory. Seeing the potential here, the Arkansas territorial capital was relocated upriver from swampy Arkansas Post to Little Rock in 1821.

It was not a foregone conclusion that this little community would be named Little Rock. Land speculators made competing claims to the lots in the area, and one group of them lobbied for the establishment of a town called Arkopolis. This name even appears on some maps from the early 1820s. But the court ruled against that faction's claims, and the short-lived name Arkopolis became a footnote in history.

The Quapaw did not benefit from the growing town on the edge of their reservation. In 1824 they were removed from central Arkansas and the reservation was opened to white settlement. Early Little Rock thrived on Indian Removal in the 1830s. As indigenous tribes were relocated from east to west along the Trail of Tears, many of the routes took them by Little Rock, where local contractors took advantage of the opportunity to make fortunes by supplying them.

Businesses also sprang up in the immediate vicinity of the Point of Rocks, catering to riverboat men, travelers, and locals who wanted to drink, gamble, and rendezvous with ladies of ill repute. It became such a riotous part of town that in post-Civil War years the district between Commerce, Rock, Elm, and Water Streets was called Hell's Half Acre.

By this time railroads were beginning to spread in the state and link Arkansas to other parts of the country. Little Rock was an important hub, and rail lines arriving on the north shore played a huge role in the growth of Argenta and North Little Rock. But the only ways to transfer goods from the rail terminus on one side of the river to the other side was to unload the freight and ferry it across. A railroad bridge across the river was needed so that trains could continue their journey uninterrupted. The Little Rock was the perfect support for the foot of a bridge.

But it needed to be cut down to size first. On October 29, 1872, the *Arkansas Gazette* reported that "several tons of rock have been cut away and thrown into the river, so much so as to greatly change the appearance of the rock from the lower side." No photograph or accurate drawing of the Point of Rocks is known to exist from before this time, so we don't know exactly what it looked like originally.

Despite the aggressive start, that bridge was never built. The Baring Cross Bridge upstream was completed in 1873 and began carrying rail traffic. But it wasn't until 1884 that the Junction Bridge was finally built across the river at the Point of Rocks. It originally had a swing span that could open to allow ships to pass, and this required that even more of the Little Rock be removed. It seemed to be a small price to pay for the benefits of modern progress! Hell's Half Acre also disappeared; the block was now dominated by railroad tracks.

As interest in historic preservation grew in the early 1900s, the Little Rock Civitan Club wanted to pay tribute to the Little Rock, which represented the origin of the city. But because of the rail traffic at the site, it was deemed dangerous to encourage visitors to go there. So they got permission to remove a 4700-pound chunk of the Little Rock and display it at City Hall with a plaque.

In the 1950s, scholar Samuel D. Dickinson drew attention to Little Rock's French heritage by rallying support for naming one of the city's streets after La Harpe. He also argued that the more correct term for the Little Rock, given its size and shape, is not "le Petit Rocher," but "la Petite Roche." That name stuck, and La Petite Roche has been the standard name for the rock since then.

In 1970, the Little Rock was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The railroad company owned the bridge and the riverfront property around it, including La Petite Roche. By the end of the twentieth century, they had stopped using it for train traffic, so in 2001 it was sold to the city of Little Rock. With the property finally in the hands of the public, the city was able to incorporate it into Riverfront Park and develop the area around the Little Rock for tourism and public enjoyment. The commemorative piece of the Little Rock at City Hall was returned to its original site. La Petite Roche Landing at Sturgis Plaza in Riverfront Park now provides access and historical interpretation to help visitors understand the significance of this rock.

A lot has changed in 300 years. In 1722, La Harpe became the first white person to describe the rocky shoreline in this area of the Arkansas River, a landmark that the indigenous people had known and used for ages. In 1822, the Little Rock was the landing for ferry and riverboat traffic at the crossing of two major transportation arteries, and as a result had collected a small but growing community of white settlers clustered around it—a newly-established territorial capital bearing its name. In 1922, the rock was anchoring another kind of traffic crossing—rail transportation. Just like the flowing river and the rolling trains, the city didn't slow down to commemorate the bicentennial. J.N. Heiskell of the *Arkansas Gazette* realized this in the 1940s, saying, "The 200th anniversary of the discovery of our rock was allowed to pass absolutely unnoticed. If the year 2022 should pass with no proper observance of the Tercentennial of the discovery of the historic rock, don't say I didn't warn you."

Now in 2022, La Petite Roche has come into its own as a hub for yet another kind of traffic—tourism. It is now receiving the spotlight that it deserves as the very foundation stone of the city, and the tricentennial of its first written mention—even if indirect—is an opportunity for commemoration and celebration that the people of Little Rock are not going to let slip by this time around. The City of Little Rock's event calendar online lists several programs that will celebrate the heritage of La Petite Roche throughout this tricentennial year 2022.

La Petite Roche has always drawn people to itself. An ancient landmark for traders and travelers, this junction of pathways became a hub for commerce and transportation, and the

city it gave birth to continues to grow and connect people. This spot for anchoring boats and bridges also anchors the capital of our state. It may be a little rock, but it looms large in historic significance.

Please join us next month for a tour of the Camp Ouachita Girl Scout Camp Historic District, built by the CCC in the Rustic style on scenic Lake Sylvania. For more information on these and other historic sites in our state, visit [ArkansasPreservation.com](https://www.arkansaspreservation.com).

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