

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name McGehee City Jail
other names/site number Site #DE0284

2. Location

street & number SW corner of S. 1st Street and Pine Street not for publication
city or town McGehee vicinity
state Arkansas code AR county Desha code 041 zip code 71654

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination
request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic
Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets
does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant
 nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date
Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See Continuation sheet for additional
comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain): _____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s), district, site, structure, object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Table with columns: Contributing, Noncontributing, buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total. Values: 1, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 1.

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT/Correctional Facility

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER/Plain/Traditional

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK, walls BRICK, roof CONCRETE, other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Levels of Significance (local, state, national)

LOCAL

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

LAW

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

Period of Significance

1908-1935

Significant Dates

1908-1935

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked)

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion D is marked)

Architect/Builder

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- Previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: _____

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Summary

The McGehee City Jail is located on the southwest corner of South 1st Street and Pine Street, in downtown McGehee in Desha County, Arkansas. The small, one-story building is built out of brick and rests on a continuous brick foundation. The flat roof of the building is made of cast concrete. The openings of the building have metal bars and no window glass. The front of the building had three heavy metal doors.

Elaboration

The McGehee City Jail is located in downtown McGehee, Desha County, Arkansas on the southwest corner of South 1st Street and Pine Street. The small building is only one story tall and has a rectangular plan. It is made out of whitewashed brick. The building rests on a continuous foundation made of brick as well. The only ornamentation on the building is a projecting brick cornice. Window openings on the back of the building have metal rods with no glass. Openings on the front of the building are covered by doors composed of metal strips.

The building's interior is very simple and utilitarian. It is divided into three cells, only one of which has a toilet. The interior walls are made of brick.

Front/Northeast Façade

The front façade has three doors spaced equally apart. Each door is made of twenty horizontal metal strips and three vertical metal strips and can be locked from the outside, thanks to a handle on the right side that can be locked to a cinder block on the wall to the right. On the leftmost door, the handle and lock is on the left side of the door rather than the right and is lower than the handles on the center and right doors. The center door has three wooden planks on its top half. On these planks is engraved "MC GEHEE / CITY JAIL / 1908 – 1935."

The building's front façade is made of brick that has been painted white. On the top of the façade are three projecting brick cornices, each of which protrudes out more than the one below it. There is a large plant growth that has attached to the top right corner of the east façade.

Side/Northwest Façade

The northwest façade is quite simple. There are no windows or doors and it is made completely of whitewashed brick. There are no ornamentations on this side of the building. Some damage has been made to the top right corner of the north façade, where some bricks are missing. Over half of the top layer of bricks, which forms the highest course of cornice on the front and back of the building, is missing as well.

Rear/ Southwest Façade

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The back of the building has three small window openings in roughly the same places as the doors on the front. Each of these openings is covered by a grate made of metal rods. Each grate is made of six vertical rods and three horizontal rods. There is no glass covering these grates. Like on the front of the building, there are three courses of corbeled brick forming the cornices. Some of the bricks on the top left corner of this façade are missing.

Side/Southeast Façade

The southeast façade seems to be the mirror image of the northwest façade, though the same plant growth that covers part of the east façade covers the entire southeast façade except for a small sliver on the left.

Interior

The interior of the jail is divided into three cells. Only the southern cell has a toilet.

Integrity

The McGehee City Jail retains excellent integrity. No known changes have been made to the building. Other than some deterioration of the bricks on the northwest corner of the building, the jail maintains its original character. The plant growth on the south and east façades could be easily removed and does not affect the integrity of the building.

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Summary

The McGehee City Jail is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion A** for its association with the beginnings of governmental activities and law enforcement in McGehee, Arkansas.

Elaboration

Desha County was formed on December 12, 1838. Its economy was mostly based on agriculture—cotton and corn, specifically. The county had no seat of justice for years, and justice was “transacted wherever convenience dictated.”¹ The seat was later moved to Napoleon, which no longer exists.² The county grew as it became a transportation hub. Surrounded by the Mississippi, Arkansas, and White rivers, steamboats often passed through the county and stopped at its ports. Railroads also contributed to the growth of Desha County. D.C. Sawins oversaw the construction of the Little Rock, Pine Bluff, and New Orleans Railroad, which passed through Desha County.³

In 1857, Benjamin McGehee moved to Desha County with his wife, Sarah, and his children, Abner, Laura, and Mary. On July 1, 1876, Abner McGehee bought 240 acres of land from Chester Ashby for two dollars per acre. On this land, McGehee erected a house for himself, and became one of the most successful farmers in the county. When the railroad from Pine Bluff to Chicot County was constructed and passed through McGehee’s land, he capitalized on the opportunity by borrowing \$1,000 and opening a commissary. He financed his new venture by selling timber from his farm to the Little Rock and Texas Railroad (which would later become the Missouri Pacific Line) and by opening a mercantile business. People continued to move into the area, and on March 5, 1906, an order of incorporation was signed and McGehee’s land became McGehee, Desha County, Arkansas.⁴

In its early days, McGehee and the rest of Desha County had a “lawless element” to it.⁵ Outlaws and ruffians often hid in the swamps near towns, emerging only to murder and pillage.⁶ In 1908, McGehee took its first major step towards law enforcement. Land on the corner of what is now South First Street and Pine Street was purchased from Abner McGehee for \$250. On this land the people of McGehee spent \$536 to build a three-cell jailhouse.⁷

¹ *The Goodspeed Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas* (St. Louis: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890) , 997-1000.

² *Ibid.*, 1000.

³ *Ibid.*, 1001.

⁴ <http://www.cityofmcgehee.com/history>; <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=877>; Goodspeed 1033

⁵ Goodspeed, 1003.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Information on the McGehee City Jail in the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

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The McGehee City Jail was mostly used to hold culprits of petty crimes, such as disturbing the peace or theft. These criminals were usually held overnight or for just a couple of days—the jail was not a place for permanent incarceration. Offenders of more serious crimes, such as murder, were taken elsewhere. However, the City Jail was a key part of the development of McGehee’s law enforcement, as it allowed the city to crack down on crime and even played a subtle role in the construction of the East and West Highway.

The most common offense of McGehee City Jail inhabitants was robbery of some sort. The majority of these cases involved theft of money or small items. For example, in June 1926, Louis Mitchell stole clothing and a shooting iron and was registered at the city lock-up after being reported to the city police by one of his accomplices.⁸ In December 1926, Ernest Young reported that two men had stolen his pistol and an iron safe. One of the thieves was locked up in the City Jail, while another got away.⁹

Some cases of theft were more serious, however, such as car theft. In December 1926, Sterling Scott and Bobert Roberson stole a Buick and five gallons of gas from a Mr. Fults. They drove the car out of town, but ran into a cotton wagon and continued on foot to a church, where they were found sleeping by the sheriff of McGehee. Both men were locked up in the City Jail when returned to McGehee.¹⁰ There was also one case of confidence men who used “hoodoo” on P. Parker to trick him into giving them money. These men were caught in Greenville, Arkansas, and sent back to McGehee to be locked up.¹¹

Another common offense of McGehee prisoners was disturbing the peace. One such case occurred in on February 3, 1926, when Willie Barnes was arrested for fighting and disturbing the peace. He was fined \$15.90, but couldn’t pay so he remained a “citizen of the city bastille” for a few days.¹² Edwin Taylor was put in jail for a day because he was frightening children by being naked in the woods surrounding McGehee.¹³ Domestic violence was also a problem in McGehee. In February 1927, Talmadge Johnson was hit in the head with a piece of wood by his wife. Johnson then pushed his wife into a pool of water. Both were escorted to the city jail and kept overnight.¹⁴

Some citizens of McGehee were arrested for violating prohibition laws or for other alcohol-related disturbances. For example, Jesse Williams was put in jail for one night for selling liquor in November 1926.¹⁵ A stranger was arrested and incarcerated in September 1925 for being so drunk that he could not even give the police officers his name or address.¹⁶ These arrests make sense in the context of the time

⁸ *McGehee Times*, 8/20/26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12/17/26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12/7/26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1/20/28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2/5/26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4/24/25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2/8/27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11/19/26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9/4/25.

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period, because they both occurred between the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1920 and the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933.¹⁷

More serious crimes usually resulted in sending the criminal, almost always a murderer, to another jail. Henry Brown, who killed Dick Coutts in January 1926, was sent to Arkansas City; Eddie Newman, who killed McGehee's night marshal J.G. Moss in August 1927, was also sent to Arkansas City; A.R. "Bud" Jones, who shot and killed Johnny Johnson at a dance hall in October 1927, was taken to the Desha County Jail.¹⁸ These examples are concrete evidence that the McGehee City Jail was mostly used for a temporary holding place until a fine was paid, the criminal had served his short sentence for a petty crime, or the authorities could transport him elsewhere. As a reporter of the *McGehee Times* noted, "All roads lead to McGehee and the law evaders, as well as honest sojourners, have to pass through this gateway...and the fugitive often spends his time awaiting an escort in the city bastille."¹⁹

However, there are some unique cases of serious criminals being held in the McGehee City Jail rather than being transported elsewhere. Perhaps the most notable is the murder of Frank Hamilton by his fourteen year-old daughter Annie Mae, who struck him with an axe after he had beaten and threatened her mother. Annie Mae was placed in jail until her father's death and then released because the coroner's jury deemed the murder "justifiable."²⁰

The city jail was also used for holding the criminally insane until they could be transported to asylums in other cities. On February 3, 1926, a "demented colored woman" said she had been told that she could eat with "the white folks" and then went to a Mr. Bricker's home saying someone was trying to kill her. When she was locked up later that day, she was unable to give the police her name. She remained in the McGehee City Jail until her friends could arrange to remove her to an insane asylum in Louisiana.²¹ There were numerous other cases like this throughout the jail's years of operation.²²

There were some notable break-out attempts during the time of the jail's operation. On September 6, 1925, a local African-American man was put in jail for "beating his board bill." He picked at the jail's brick wall constantly and was released because the officers were afraid that he would destroy the jail before his court date the next day. He let it be known that he would "wreck" the jail or free himself.²³

On December 30, 1926, Sam Copeland broke out of the jail by picking the inside bricks out and then pounding the outside bricks with the stove leg. He had been arrested Wednesday night at 11:00 P.M. and

¹⁷ *U.S. Constitution*, amend. 18; *U.S. Constitution*, amend. 21.

¹⁸ *McGehee Times*, 2/16/26; 8/5/27; 10/25/27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11/2/26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4/15/27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2/5/26.

²² *Ibid.*, 10/14/27; 5/12/25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9/8/25.

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broke out around 2:15 A.M. on Thursday. The officer on duty, Officer Moss, had left the jail to eat at the Central Café when the breakout occurred.²⁴ Three months later, A.G. Browning tried the same method of breaking out as Copeland, but awoke the night fireman, Mr. Thomas, and was thwarted.²⁵

Sometimes, after being held in the City Jail until their trial, McGehee criminals were put to work on the Desha County Farm. Most of these criminals were assigned either 30 or 60 days on the farm and a small fine (usually \$25). These convicts were used for the construction of the East and West Highway. This alternative was preferable to most law-abiding citizens of McGehee: "Everyone in McGehee would rather have that much-needed highway...than...so many night prowlers around our city."²⁶ Thus, the jail allowed city officials to keep criminals under lockdown until they could be forced to work on the construction of the new highway that would further McGehee's use as a transportation hub and in turn aid the growth of the city's population.

On November 2, 1926, plans to replace the McGehee City Jail began to be set in motion. At a city council meeting, it was proposed that a new jail, city hall, and fire station be built. The reasoning for a new jail was that it was "desirable to have the jail elsewhere than on the principal business street."²⁷ These plans did not come to fruition, however, until McGehee saw a series of building projects in 1929 and on into the 1930s. On April 25, 1929, a bill was introduced to the Arkansas House of Representative to provide up to \$125,000 for construction of a post-office building for McGehee. The bill stated that the city would be able to acquire, through condemnation or purchase, suitable buildings "for the use of the United States Post Office and other government offices in the town of McGehee."²⁸

The years that followed the bill's proposition found a population growth (the city's population grew 67% from 1920 to 1930) and many new building projects to the city, including the attempt to build a new county courthouse in McGehee rather than Arkansas City and the construction of a modern hospital, a new bank, an improved sewer system, and a new city hall and jail complex.²⁹ The plans for a new city hall and jail went into action in October 1929, when the city started taking bids on the current city hall's location.³⁰

The contracting company A.B. McBride and Son was hired to build the new building with the assistance of the Public Works Administration (PWA).³¹ The PWA was created by Roosevelt on June 16, 1933 as a part of the New Deal. The organization helped fund public works projects, such as the construction of waterworks, highways, bridges, and municipal buildings. The reasoning behind the WPA was that the

²⁴ Ibid., 12/31/26.

²⁵ Ibid., 3/15/27.

²⁶ Ibid., 12/7/26.

²⁷ Ibid., 11/5/26.

²⁸ Ibid., 4/25/29.

²⁹ Ibid., 5/1/30; 8/29/29; 10/28/29; 3/13/30.

³⁰ Ibid., 10/17/29.

³¹ Ibid., 8/29/35

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government would “benefit from boosts in federal construction during depressive periods.” While the economy was doing well, states were encouraged to build up “prosperity reserves” that they could use on public works projects (which would provide employment and a market for materials) in case of a depression. Arkansas made good use of PWA funding and used \$2,118,987 to build courthouses, city halls, and jails across the state—including those in McGehee that brought about the end of the old City Jail.³²

Work on the new City Jail started on August 27, 1935 and was completed on January 21, 1936.³³ When the new city hall and jail was opened in mid-1936, the old City Jail was closed and remains so to this day.³⁴ Perhaps the fact that it has not been demolished (like the jail that replaced it has been) is a testament to the importance of the building to the people of McGehee.

Statement of Significance

The McGehee City Jail is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **local significance** under **Criterion A** for its association with the beginnings of governmental activities and law enforcement in McGehee, Arkansas.

³² Holly Hope, *An Ambition to be Preferred: New Deal Recovery Efforts and Architecture in Arkansas, 1933-1943* (Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, 2006), 19-23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1/23/36.

³⁴ Jack May, e-mail to Ralph Wilcox, 25 May 2010.

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Bibliography

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Verbal Boundary Description

From the southwest corner of 1st and Pine street, proceed southwesterly along the south side of Pine Street for 50 feet, thence proceed southeasterly perpendicular to Pine Street for 125 feet, thence proceed westerly parallel to Pine Street for 50 feet to the west side of 1st street, thence proceed northwesterly along the northeastern side of 1st Street for 125 feet to the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses the land historically associated with the McGehee City Jail.