

**A Storm Couldn't Tear  
Them Down:  
The Mixed Masonry Buildings of Silas Owens Sr.  
1938-1955**

By Holly Hope



*Silas Owens, Sr.*

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A Historic Context Written and Researched  
By Holly Hope

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## A STORM COULDN'T TEAR THEM DOWN: THE MIXED MASONRY BUILDINGS OF SILAS OWENS, SR., 1938-1955

### INTRODUCTION

The western and northwestern sections of Arkansas, geographically known as the Ouachita Mountains, Arkansas River Valley and Ozark Mountain areas, contain an abundance of natural building materials in the form of limestone and sandstone. From the late 1930s through the mid-1950s an architectural style utilizing a combination of cream brick trim with cut sandstone and cut limestone, (which was paired frequently with red brick as well as the cream) and even crystals, became popular in the state. The style, dubbed “Mixed Masonry” by Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) architectural historians, has remained a stalwart feature of the Arkansas landscape, almost so omnipresent as to become as much a part of the land as the trees and hillsides. This style has been found in areas of the state close to the Missouri, Texas and Oklahoma borders. States flanking Arkansas have reported the presence of Mixed Masonry buildings, some with slight differences in areas such as the brick trim and the use of rubble stone rather than cut stone; however no other State Historic Preservation Offices have concentrated exclusively on a survey of Mixed Masonry structures to this date so a true comparison by state is still in the future.

The buildings were constructed for religious, commercial and residential purposes and were modest, unassuming, predominately one-story structures. These Mixed Masonries exhibit a variety of architectural influences within a vernacular adaptation. Associated styles include Craftsman, English Revival, Mediterranean and Ranch as well as one known example in Yell County constructed in a restrained French Eclectic style. The Mediterranean style can be seen in the frequent use of arcaded porches and the utilization of a brick quoin treatment on the building corners can be linked to a variety of high-style influences such as Georgian, Italianate and Colonial Revival.



*French Eclectic Mixed  
Masonry in Danville*

Use of such fashionable traditions on humble rural farmhouses presented an incongruous blend, which resulted in a comfortable and interesting architectural form that

ultimately fit the environment, the economic atmosphere and the domestic needs of the farm family. Areas with high concentrations of sandstone such as the Boston Mountains and the Arkansas River Valley provided an abundance of building materials for local masons. Men who worked in that vocation in Central and Northwest Arkansas were numerous and many learned their trade from a long line of masons within their own families. A mason commonly linked with a large number of Mixed Masonries, as well as cut stone and brick buildings in the Central Arkansas area, was Silas Owens, Sr. His name was synonymous with quality and Owens lent a unique and artistic palette to the exterior walls of these buildings by incorporating a herringbone pattern into the course of the rock veneer, which made them instantly recognizable to those who are familiar with his work.

### **SILAS OWENS, SR.**



*Silas Owens, Sr.*

Silas Owens, Sr., was born in 1907 in the Faulkner County community of Solomon Grove, a traditionally African American settlement homesteaded circa 1890. The area came to be populated by two groups of former slaves led by Frank and George Walker that split into one cell on the heights of Batesville Mountain at Solomon Grove and another close to Damascus. The adjacent community of Zion Grove experienced an increase in population in the mid-1900s when a large number of African Americans from Damascus moved south. The areas remained separate localities until the two were incorporated into the town of Twin Groves in 1991. Members of the Owens family were linked through marriage to the “highland” Walkers so the Silas Owens branch has enjoyed a lengthy association with Faulkner County. Many of the original settlers took up farming as well as hiring on to work at local cotton plantations and related ginning and compressing industries.<sup>1</sup>

Silas Owens, Sr., was surrounded by extended family networks in Solomon Grove and assisted his father, Haywood Owens, with the family farm. Haywood raised several foodstuffs in addition to harvesting cotton, which his six sons cultivated and picked for him. Silas, Sr., also came to be a landowner on Batesville Mountain in Solomon Grove and engaged in subsistence farming, producing peaches, corn and potatoes. However,

Owens demonstrated an affinity for construction work at an early age, engaging a hired man and the Owens' six children to work the land until the boys and the girls could participate as a part of his construction crew. His niece, Lillie Owens of Conway, stated in a 2001 interview that when she was a child her uncle would create doll houses for her. Ms. Owens thought it ironic that a man with "rocksense" could also be so patient and attentive with a little girl, taking time to play dolls with her and reminding her to straighten the seam on her stockings. This same endurance and attention to detail became very much a part of the artistry of Silas Owens, Sr.'s, rockwork and the reason his expertise as a mason was so highly sought after.<sup>2</sup>

It is unclear when Owens began working in the construction field but former Twin Groves resident Albessie Thompson stated that he worked under a WPA contract on the 1936 Reptile House and Elephant House at the Little Rock Zoo, which would have placed him in his late twenties. Twin Groves Mayor Cornelius Tyus, a former Owens crew member, remembered that Silas Owens, Sr., had worked at a local cotton compress



*Elephant House at the Little Rock Zoo*

in his youth, but Tyus estimated that he had started in the construction business as a teenager. Owens received training in carpentry and drafting from a local man; however, his skill in rockwork was largely self-taught. When the man became ill Owens branched out on his own as a contractor. The

Solomon Grove Smith-Hughes Building in Twin Groves (NR 12/09/94), constructed in 1938, is one of the earliest known examples of Silas Owens, Sr.'s, exemplary rockwork in Faulkner County, where the bulk of his work is located. His first Mixed Masonry, also in Twin Groves (Hobbs House, FA1255) has been dated to approximately 1938 as well.<sup>3</sup>

## **THE MIXED MASONRY ATMOSPHERE**

Rural Arkansas in the 1930s and 1940s was predominantly agricultural. Farming was the main occupation of the residents of Central and Northwest Arkansas. There was little large-scale manufacturing and few bustling retail districts so many people raised their own food and sold a little in city centers like Conway or Fayetteville. By the late 1930s Arkansas farmers had weathered the Depression and natural disasters in the form

of floods and droughts so they were used to making do and utilizing accessible resources. Despite the availability of stone in the Ozarks and Arkansas River Valley regions, cut stone and fieldstone were not popular building materials for sheathing of entire houses in Arkansas until the late 1930s. Stone was previously an essential element for features such as foundations, fireplaces and stone fences, but to build a home of stone required many man hours and a relatively high skill level, which were not readily available to the busy farmer or tenant. It also denoted a sense of permanency that tenant farmers and struggling agriculturalists could not afford. In contrast, several stone structures dedicated to civic, commercial or outbuilding use are documented in the AHPP archives with construction dates beginning in the 1880s. Safe storage of sensitive documents, fire prevention and cooling properties were needs met by the use of stone on such buildings. The numbers of stone houses surveyed by the AHPP reveal sporadic periods of increased residential construction from the late 1920s through the early 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

The construction period of the existing Mixed Masonries built by Silas Owens, Sr., in Central Arkansas spans from 1938 to the early 1950s. During the Depression years the average resident in the area suffered financially as did the rest of the state. However, at the beginning of World War II situations slowly improved through such factors as the creation of wartime industries, military enrollment and the resulting local job vacancies, which infused a slight increase into the local economy and allowed families to upgrade existing farmhouses with a stone facelift or to build new ones. Defense plants in Jacksonville and Maumelle ran buses from the Faulkner County community of Centerville to transport those workers who did not uproot to other towns and states. In the meantime regional businesses experienced a loss of labor, opening new positions to the previously unemployed.

U.S. Highway 65 had been constructed through the area in the late 1930s and the growing number of automobiles meant that rural residents could now drive to neighboring communities for jobs. Improved transportation also meant that craftsmen could range into new territory and that building materials could be transported farther with greater ease. This could also account for the bulk of Owens' homes being found on main thoroughfares.<sup>5</sup>



While rural families were able to make some domestic improvements as a result of these events, the rise in income was still not a significant leap to previously unimagined affluence. Construction materials like rock could be obtained from a farmer's own land, a nearby creek bed, or it could be hauled in a wagon to the jobsite by Owens' crew from a known source called Damascus Quarry on Batesville Mountain at Twin Groves. The rock found in the Faulkner County area was favored by Owens and other masons for its color, malleability and availability. The vein found at Batesville Mountain is categorized as Atoka and was deposited by rivers about 300 to 320 million years ago as a thin layer of sandstone. A dark brown stone with reddish cast would result from sand-sized particles of quartz being cemented together through depositional processes. Impurities of iron and manganese within the quartz would provide a pleasing red organic stain that would nicely contrast with the cream brick of the typical Mixed Masonry. Atoka rock would be deposited in flat, even layers, which provided uniform thickness preferred by masons because that uniformity made it easy to work with.<sup>6</sup>

### **THE MIXED MASONRY FORM**

Farm houses of the 1930s and 1940s were out of necessity less than luxurious accommodations. However, the Mixed Masonry exhibited a stylish facade while answering the needs of low maintenance. *Arkansas Experiment Station Bulletin 305* by Deane Carter published the results of a study on rural housing conditions and needs in Arkansas during the year 1933-34. The study stated that the early 1930s actually saw the construction of few masonry (brick, concrete and stone) farmhouses, placing the number at approximately one percent of the seven counties surveyed. According to the study, one-story houses were the preferred height and the average family required one room per person, resulting in a common configuration of four rooms at a total square footage of 969.36. The study "Farm Housing in the South," published in the early 1950s by the Southern Cooperative Project, continued to bear out the desire for one-story homes through 1948. The majority of Silas Owens' buildings are small and one-story in accordance with the study; however, there are three Mixed Masonry residences in Faulkner County that have finished fenestrated space in the gabled areas of the attic.

Carter's 1934 study found that though the average house was considered cramped and there were problems with crowding, the residents did not place as high a priority on more space as they did on house repair. Improvements to exterior walls were placed fourth in a list of six desired home enhancements. The use of available stone in such upgrades could have been due in part to the 1942 classification of major forest industries as essential to the defense effort during World War II. The products of local sawmills were acquisitioned for military use only, so Central Arkansas farmers likely circumvented those restrictions with locally obtained and, in many cases, free materials. Owens was hired many times to cover an existing frame house with a stone veneer – another money saving technique. The brick trim found on Mixed Masonry buildings meant a financial expenditure on the part of the owner but in comparison it was less expensive than sheathing the entire home in brick. Silas Owens, Sr.'s, buildings thus seemed to meet the economic and aesthetic needs of the farmers in the region while providing them with a durable and distinctive presentation.<sup>7</sup>

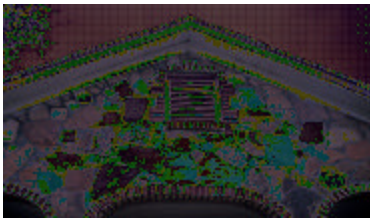
The Mixed Masonry as an architectural form exhibited elements of the national trends of the day. The Craftsman style with its three-or four-over-one Craftsman sash windows, open rafter tails and gabled porch is the most common influence in these buildings. Silas Owens, Sr., favored the use of arcades on his porches, which introduced a graceful Mediterranean touch to an otherwise basic bungalow. The 1950s study on Southern farm housing preferences revealed that front and back porches for work and recreation were considered essential features in a farmhouse. The presence of a side porch was noted as an indicator of higher socioeconomic status. Two surviving Silas Owens, Sr., Mixed Masonries feature a side porch, (Walt Tyler House, FA1298, Fred and Ethel Hobbs House, FA1332) and a few were constructed with wraparound porches, providing shade and extended shelter to the side elevation in this manner. The English Revival style could be detected in Owens' work through the use of prominent front gables and whimsical, front-facing, exterior chimneys. The ever present quoins of brick added a Georgian or Colonial Revival touch to his vernacular designs, as did the mid-to-late 1940s use of six-over-six windows. Some late 1940s and early 1950s examples were



*Mediterranean style arcades*

constructed in a more Minimal plan with patios at the front entry, small, integral roofed porches or stoops supported with wrought iron. The Ranch style could be seen in the low, linear, hip-roofed models with large picture windows that he constructed after World War II.

Cream-brick trim was a defining feature of the Silas Owens, Sr., Mixed Masonry. The standard size of the modular brick used was 4 X 2 2/3 X 8 inches. Sometimes they were wire cut with a striated design or with a mottled face and in some cases they were smooth faced. Brick would be obtained from Malvern, Hope, Conway or Morrilton and



*Mixed Masonry brick trim*

often the Hiegel Lumber Company in Conway would deliver the bricks to the site. Common areas of brick placement were on window and door surrounds, louvers, at all corners of the building, and outlining the arches and piers of the porch and the shoulders and

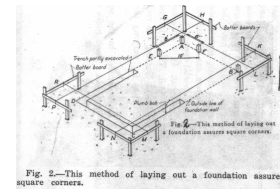
throat of the chimney. The usual pattern utilized by Owens was three header bricks and three stretcher bricks around windows, doors and attic and crawlspace louvers. The corners were also adorned with that configuration evoking the quoin treatment. This pattern in relation to Mixed Masonries was not referred to as “quoins” by the various masons interviewed for this paper. As a group they simply called it “trim.” This term was also used in connection with the brick placed around fenestration and porches.<sup>8</sup>

Arches would usually receive a simple header or stretcher pattern to the area of be featured in the aforementioned arrangement of three. Square porches would be more likely to display the three/three pattern of the rest of the house. One atypical example of Owens’ work in Clinton, Van Buren County, (VB0241) exhibits porch posts composed entirely of brick. Though this home possesses the typical superior craftsmanship of Silas Owens, Sr., it is not as visually pleasing as those that feature arches. Another design that Owens used often was a starburst pattern in brick surrounding round louvers at the apex of gables. There are fewer Mixed Masonries in the state that combine red brick with sandstone as it is commonly used on limestone buildings in the Mixed Masonry style. There is only one surviving Owens house in Conway composed of limestone from the Boone County town of Zinc, but he utilized his usual cream-brick in lieu of the red. His son Silas Owens, Jr., who worked with him from 1950 until his father’s death in 1960,

stated that this was not a favored treatment for Silas, Sr., as he was more partial to working with the sandstone.

## CONSTRUCTION OF THE MIXED MASONRY

The first step in constructing Mixed Masonries was to lay the footing and foundation walls. Silas Owens, Sr., was familiar with carpentry due to his initial training and most of the time he would construct the frame, but sometimes a separate carpenter or the homeowner would undertake the task. As was stated earlier he might also be called upon to lay a rock veneer over existing buildings so in those instances Owens and his crew would begin by adding diagonal sheathing over the siding. Laying out the foundation for new construction consisted of determining the size and shape of the building by securing a baseline of strings to stakes placed at the corners, called batter boards. At that point the excavation of the footing began. There is one Owens Mixed Masonry church known to have been built with a basement and the Silas Owens, Sr., house in Twin Groves (FA1258) was constructed with a small partial basement. The majority of the buildings documented by the AHPP were constructed on a trench footing generally twelve to eighteen inches wide and one or two feet deep.



*Typical foundation form*

The foundation trench would be filled with a mixture of rock and concrete layers on top of which would be laid the stone veneer. An inner wall of wooden diagonal sheathing with a covering of one to two layers of felt paper for insulation would be constructed as a form to support the stone. Eight inch wall ties nailed to studs at a distance of two feet would be bent into the mortar joints and bricks, providing stabilization for the veneer. The interior, including load bearing walls, cabinetry and flooring (except for finishing) would often be done by Owens and his team as well.

Large, long rocks with a width of two to four inches used in his famous herringbone pattern would be sighted by Silas Owens, Sr., with his unfailingly artistic eye. That design was not always present on Owens' buildings because he sometimes could not find the proper kind of stone; however, such structures still displayed a telling degree of craftsmanship and skill. Rocks that were found on the surface of the ground

would be darker in color while those that were unearthed from beneath the ground cover would be lighter. Some buildings would contain a combination of both. In those instances when the farmer did not supply the rock or Owens did not use the Damascus Quarry, he would hand pick them from privately owned quarries, which would be delivered by the yard or ton to the construction site on pallets.

The stone would be sorted at the site with an eye toward size, color and form requirements. Once it was sorted, Owens would use a flat chisel called a blocking tool



*Artistic coursing by Owens*

and a hammer to shape the sandstone prior to laying it up.

A team of two to three people would then begin to lay the rock from corner to corner. Silas Owens, Jr., recalled that the mortar required for his father's buildings needed to consist of "a stiff mud," which required quick

construction, a must when working with large, thin stones. A mud man would mix a formula of twenty to thirty shovels of sand and Portland cement with water for the desired consistency. The three most frequent types of mortar joints seen on stone buildings in Arkansas are: grapevine, consisting of a raised, rounded joint; flush cut, a flat troweled joint even with the rock surface, and raked joints, which were tooled out about a ¼ inch with a ½ inch piece of bent tin to make a shadowline around the stone. The term "raked" has also been used in reference to scraping out hardened mortar so that no mortar joints are evident, though this technique is usually employed with cobblestone construction.

Owens did not use the grapevine mortar and he seemed to favor the raked joint. Excess mortar and rocks that remained after the top layer was scraped off would be removed with a stiff brush. Many stone homes from that period would mix colored powder available from building supply stores in black, red, buff, chocolate and gray into the mortar. Owens was known to use dye sometimes; however, the only remaining vestiges of such a treatment on his buildings appear to have been a black dye. The dye often fades over time in exposed areas so a close inspection of the protected sections of the wall under the eaves or porches would provide clues to the use of color.

It was recommended when laying up the stone that the rocks were not to touch the sheathing. *Missouri Agricultural Extension Circular 297*, "Cobblestone Construction for

Farm Buildings,” stated that the mason could use the circumference of the handle of his trowel to measure the maximum distance of the rock from the sheathing of diagonal wood that served as the base for the stone wall surface. Another method was to simply use the thickest rock as a gauge for all others. The wall surface could be kept straight through guides of string placed at the corners of the building or, if the mason was experienced enough, by sighting.

In the case of the Mixed Masonry structures the brick course would provide a square corner, but first and foremost it was employed for visual interest, not as a device for strength or crack prevention. During construction Owens would lay up the brick quoins first and then the stone would be shaped to fit in between the courses. As the stone was being laid from corner to corner the veneer would be built up to the level of the windows, at which point the brick header and stretcher courses would be applied to the sides and the top of the window opening around a brick mold consisting of wood or steel angles. The brick window sills would be built last in order to prevent excess work by having to clean up errant drops of mortar. Construction of porch supports would begin at the concrete porch floor. If arches were employed two adjacent radial plywood forms affixed at the point of the spring would be joined by a “lag” or crosspiece of  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch plywood. This form would provide a removable mold on top of which the brick would be laid for the arch. The forms would be utilized more than once and they were often loaned out to be used by other Faulkner County masons. A configuration frequently seen on Owens’ buildings would be square stones inserted in the header section of the porch abutment trim. In some cases adjacent header and stretcher courses would alternate from the interior to the exterior of the abutment and he would create a “zipper” effect with small rectangular stones.



*“zipper” effect*

Some of the more intricate examples of Silas Owens, Sr.’s, Mixed Masonry residences included exterior fireplaces, which were important elements of the overall symmetry. The early 1950s study, ‘Farm Housing in the South,’ stated that 63 percent of rural southern homeowners polled stated a desire for a fireplace in the living room or the parent’s bedroom. Owens’ homes did not include fireplaces in the bedroom, but

chimneys situated in the living room were usually prominently displayed on the exterior.



The construction of the chimney did not require a frame so it was laid as though it were part of the coursing. Interior chimneys or chases

consisted of stone and were adorned with cream brick. The exterior chimney was another opportunity for Owens to display his herringbone pattern within brick trim and these would display a variety of forms including those with rounded shoulders, graduated rounded shoulders, straight and battered or a combination of both for an English Revival influence. Owens was sometimes hired to

build chimneys, porch piers or stone foundations on frame buildings and many of his examples still exist in Faulkner County.

According to ‘Farm Housing in the South,’ an overwhelming majority of farm women expressed a desire for a window over the kitchen sink in order to observe their farm surroundings and buildings or a “pretty view.” The ability of small children to see out windows was taken into consideration when 70 percent of those polled said they would like to have low windows in the living room so their children would not have to climb or be lifted to the openings. Owens’ homes exhibited such amenities with short kitchen windows over the kitchen sink and lower windows almost reaching to the floor. He included pairs of windows in many of his buildings, which added greatly to the symmetric massing of the Mixed Masonry while also offering improved ventilation and light. Since most of Owens’ homes were built in what were rural areas, pre-assembled windows and doors were not easily attainable so he constructed them on site using cut glass from local lumber companies.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE ORIGIN OF THE MIXED MASONRY**

Mixed Masonries in Arkansas appear to have enjoyed at least fifteen years of popularity within the state. After the mid-1950s brick Ranch homes began to supplant the rock house in new



construction. The Ranch as a Post-World War II architectural movement began in 1945 with the Early Ranch style, which was not as elongated as the true Ranch (1955). The Mixed Masonry began to take on the Ranch form toward the end of its existence in the state and though he used that style, at that time Silas Owens, Sr., was beginning to receive more contracts for brick buildings. An informal windshield survey of the Mixed Masonry in Lawrence and Randolph Counties revealed later pockets of Ranch Mixed Masonries, some composed of granite, that appear to have been built by at least the late 1950s or perhaps the early 1960s. (These construction dates are based upon the observations and knowledge of architectural styles of the AHPP staff and not in-depth research or interviews.) The latest known example of a Mixed Masonry was constructed in 1994 in Greenbrier, Faulkner County, which is a considerable period of time from the latest documented Silas Owens, Sr., Mixed Masonry (Turney House, CE0103, c. 1957) and the Greenbrier home laid up by Bill Merritt.<sup>10</sup>

As was mentioned previously State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) in states adjacent to Arkansas – Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri and Louisiana – were contacted regarding the presence of Mixed Masonries. This query was conducted to determine three things: if the style in Arkansas was influenced by previous trends in other states; if so, which cardinal direction the migration to Arkansas followed; and during what point in time this occurred. Results were not definitive but they do provide valid starting points for further research.

The Texas SHPO provided AHPP with a photograph of a sandstone Mixed Masonry in Austin featuring an arcaded porch trimmed in a linear pattern of red brick. This example exhibits Craftsman styling and is similar to Owens' mid- to late-1940s models. That office had not explored regional concentrations of the style to date. Oklahoma acknowledged the presence of Mixed Masonries but stated that they often utilized red brick and featured rubble walls more often than cut sandstone. They offered a conjectured construction period of 1920s to 1940s and asserted that they were built in a variety of architectural styles; however, Architectural Historian Jim Gabbert said that no academic research had been undertaken regarding Mixed Masonries in Oklahoma. The Tennessee SHPO replied that they had such buildings but the Arkansas examples were more elaborate in the area of the brick trim and the degree of stone course patterning.



They mentioned that many of their stone buildings utilized Crab Orchard stone, an orange-pink rock found on the Cumberland Plateau. Mississippi had some “vaguely similar” buildings in the northwest but said that they were few in number and thus were not recognized as an architectural phenomenon. They offered that this was probably due to the fact that little native stone is used for construction in that state. The Louisiana SHPO made note of a stone treatment “sometimes...mixed with brickwork for additional texture,” on homes that exhibit a “slight Tudor Revival/English influence.” There were few examples in Louisiana because, as in Mississippi, there was little available stone.<sup>11</sup>

Missouri seems to be the most likely influence of the Arkansas Mixed Masonry. Contacts from Mississippi and Oregon mentioned that they had seen several examples in the southern region of the state, at Dora in Ozark County and West Plains in Howell County. A 1993 interview conducted for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources with Floyd Lansdown of Missouri recorded that his grandfather was building with stone in the 1920s. Lansdown remarked that stone buildings reached a surge in popularity in the 1940s, during which time local quarries provided north central cities in Arkansas with stone. Attached surveys of stone buildings in Missouri included a Mixed Masonry motel constructed circa 1930 and a residence built circa 1950. A 1993 *Old House Journal* article on slab rock construction in Southwestern Missouri included a photograph of a Mixed Masonry trimmed in a combination of red and cream brick. While there is no construction date noted, the house form resembles the World War II cottage style. The polychrome treatment of red and cream trim can also be found in Arkansas in limited numbers and examples have been noted in Searcy and Randolph counties in the north central and northeastern parts of the state.<sup>12</sup>

Two interesting occurrences of the earlier use of cream brick reminiscent of the Mixed Masonry have been noted. These examples are located at a great geographic distance from Arkansas, but they should not be ruled out as possible influences. It is not



in, St. Croix

very likely that rural Arkansas rock masons were aware of the 18<sup>th</sup> -century architectural traditions of the West Indies; however, the May/June 2001 issue of *Preservation* magazine contains a photograph of a Dutch colonial ruin on the island of St. Croix. The building features a cream brick header and stretcher pattern around an arcaded façade and at the corners in the style of the Mixed Masonry. Much of the 18<sup>th</sup> -century architecture on St. Croix, which utilized yellow bricks imported from Denmark for ships' ballast, was constructed by Africans enslaved on Dutch sugar

plantations. Another early use of the brick trim and quoin patterning appeared in America in the 1860s. A source of yellow bricks in America emerged with the invention of a face brick in New Jersey, which exhibited off-white yellow characteristics. This brick was used as contrasting trim around windows and doors and as quoins on red brick buildings – and sometimes vice versa - during the 1870s through the 20<sup>th</sup> century until terra cotta became more popular. Thus the Mixed Masonry demonstrates roots that extend beyond the twentieth century and raises the question of whether the Arkansas form was affected in a circuitous manner by these West Indian and East Coast versions.<sup>13</sup>

The dissemination of the Mixed Masonry in the Central region of the state, particularly in Faulkner County, appears to have been partly the result of social networks and partly due to the reputation of local masons. The Merritt family and their relatives in the Greenbrier area had four houses built in that style during the 1940s and the 1950s, all by Silas Owens, Sr. Merritt family members asked for the same type of home because they found it aesthetically pleasing in addition to possessing desirable heating and cooling properties. Limestone versions of the Mixed Masonry are not as numerous as the sandstone type; of course their concentrations depended on the availability of the stone and the logistics and expense of shipping it to another area. A rare treatment is the Mixed

Masonry rocked with crystals. Five examples combined with red or cream brick trim have been observed so far in Saline County.

### **SILAS OWENS, SR., THE BUSINESSMAN**

The enduring qualities of Silas Owens, Sr.'s, Mixed Masonries have been attributed to his superior work ethic and his artistic abilities. Once it became known that Owens produced such excellent results he received enough work throughout his career that he was able to provide consistent jobs for teams of local men and boys. Many of the men who worked with Silas, Sr., are still living in the Twin Groves area. The experience he offered them was important in an area where there were few jobs besides farming and cotton processing and some of them were able to utilize this training in their adulthood.

Not one to waste valuable time, Owens would fill the slack periods with carpentry in the absence of stone or brick work. His children, Pauline Morris, Bobby Joe Owens and Silas Owens, Jr., all mentioned memories of their father's great energy and capacity for work. Bobby Joe recalled that Sunday was the only day Silas, Sr., spent time resting on the porch in his rocking chair after church and Pauline said he "loved to work." His son Silas Owens, Jr., stated that his father worked until he fell ill, which was only a few weeks short of his death from peritonitis. Silas, Sr.'s, constant work schedule was not the result of advertising in any medium, which was the norm for rural masons at the time. Based on his reputation clients would send him a postcard or personally contact him for work. While there were many other competent masons in the area like "Coon" Firestone of Holland (who produced many fine examples of Mixed Masonries in Faulkner County), Chester Jones of Vilonia and Walt Tyler in Conway, there was plenty of work to go around. Though none of them are known to have networked commercially there was no competition among the men and those who knew Silas Owens, Sr., respected the man and his work very highly. Owens would sometimes collaborate with other mason's crews as he did on the construction of the Damascus United Methodist Church, which was constructed by white and African American craftsmen.

A close examination of the Owens Mixed Masonry reveals much more than a simple stone building. Silas Owens, Jr., said that his father liked the stone courses to be laid up in a manner similar to straight brick courses so he went to great lengths to shape the stone in the proper manner so as to provide tight, coherent facades. He left no gaping joints; extra space would be infilled with smaller stones or thin linear stone strips. Silas, Jr., remembered that sloppiness was not tolerated by Silas, Sr., and he would take care to wipe spilled mortar from the rocks, resulting in the fine, compact joints and neat palette still seen today. Silas Owens, Jr., channeled the lessons his father had taught him into a lucrative career as a mason in Faulkner County and built his own Mixed Masonry house in the 1950s with the help of the elder Owens. In later years Silas, Jr., would be called upon to make additions to his father's Mixed Masonries, which he proficiently accomplished in the same style. Viola Holliday, the owner of the Reedy Turney home in Quitman, (CE0103) hired Silas, Jr., to make an addition on her house built by his father. Mrs. Holliday was a quilter and recalled that she asked if she could lay up a couple of stones because she thought the original section of the house looked like a quilt pattern. Her perception of his father's creative intent sparked great pride in Silas, Jr., and he became very animated at her understanding of what his father had tried to accomplish. Regarding his father's work Silas, Jr., stated, "He was just good, you know. They (people) actually believed a storm couldn't blow a Silas Owens' building down." In the course of owner interviews fifty-one years later, John McGinty of McGintytown took a sledge hammer to the corner of his house laid over a frame building in 1952, to demonstrate for the author and Dr. Jeffery Allender of the University of Central Arkansas his faith in Silas Owens, Sr.'s, work.



*John McGinty*

The elder Owens is known to have worked in Little Rock, North Little Rock, Camden, Hot Springs, Malvern and Pine Bluff; however, he did not travel out of state for work. Many of the buildings he constructed were for white farm families but he also built many structures for African Americans. Though not immune from the effects of bigotry during the troubled period of race relations in Arkansas and Faulkner County during the

1940s and 1950s, his love for his work, prolific productivity and efficient business sense largely transcended resistance to hiring him because of his color.

A soft spoken, deeply religious man Silas Owens, Sr., did encounter racism in the course of his life and his work but he was able to overcome such incidents by drawing on his faith and his family. His niece Lillie Owens remembered that despite opposition to hiring a black man, he was called upon to straighten an uneven foundation on a school building in Morrilton. Owens walked around the building without a word then simply stated, “Well...I’m just sure we can do the best we can with it.” The next day a crowd gathered as he and his crew went to work, hoping to catch him in a mishap as he corrected the error. Silas Owens, Jr., related the story of the owner of a local cotton gin that was experiencing structural problems. Owens, Sr., offered to correct the defect, which he accomplished to the man’s dismay. Feeling that he could not let the word get around that he had been bested the owner promptly destroyed Owens’ work.<sup>14</sup>

Silas Owens, Sr.’s, architectural legacy is well known in the central region of the state today. Many of the people who hired him to build their homes are still living in them and each had nothing but praise for Owens, his crew and his product. His family remembered him fondly and spoke with great pride of how he interacted with the



*English Revival Mixed Masonry,  
Damascus*

community and with them. Most of his Mixed Masonries are on busy highways so many people do not have a chance to observe up close the intricate patterns of his stonework and the fact that each building is different; however, they still manage to catch the eye though many may not immediately know why. The

great individuality and skill that he poured into each structure remain evident even though several of them have been altered through the replacement of windows or large modern additions. Luckily the stone coursing is the crux of the Silas Owens, Sr., Mixed Masonry and the herringbone pattern, artistic shaping, flawless mortar joints and symmetry remain identifiable even after alterations.

The Silas Owens, Sr., Mixed Masonry is a vernacular style; however, upon examination of its architectural and social roots and the technique of the man who produced so many of them, these buildings become a complex part of Arkansas history.

His style was unique and his buildings immaculate. Lillie Owens succinctly summed up Silas Owens, Sr., when she stated of her uncle, “His work was nothing but neat and perfect.” Silas Owens, Sr., was a master in the construction of the Arkansas Mixed Masonry and he instilled his relentless ethic in many of the young men who followed behind him in the masonry business, two of whom have served as mayor of Twin Groves. Research into the origins of this architectural design remains to be done and documentation of the Arkansas Mixed Masonry in general should be prolific as it was a favored treatment for many years, but the work of Silas Owens, Sr., will likely continue to stand out as the best of the best.

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## NOTES