

**Walks through History
Harrisburg CHD
December 11, 2010
By: Rachel Silva**



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Walks through History tour of the Harrisburg Commercial Historic District! Thank Soozie Williams for her help with the tour and County Judge Charles Nix for opening the courthouse today. The courthouse square and a few adjacent blocks were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in September 2009 for their association with the development of Harrisburg and because the buildings are good examples of late 19th and early 20th century commercial-style architecture.

Explain what the National Register is, and how you get a district listed...benefits are tax credits and grants (depending on ownership).

Brief History of Harrisburg

Poinsett County was established in 1838 and named after Joel Roberts Poinsett, a botanist, horticulturalist, and Secretary of War during President Martin Van Buren's administration (1837-1841). Poinsett was also a friend of Arkansas statesman Archibald Yell, and he was well-known for introducing the poinsettia to the United States. When it was created, Poinsett County was much larger than it is today. In 1859 the northern portion of the county was taken to form Craighead County, and in 1862, the southern portion was taken to form Cross County. However, Poinsett County gained some land to the east at this time, including the

area known as “the sunken lands.” The New Madrid earthquakes, which began in Dec. 1811 and lasted for several months in 1812, created the sunken lands when a large area of land sunk beneath the level surface.

The first county seat was established at Bolivar, but in 1856, an election was held to move the county seat to a more central location in Poinsett County. Benjamin Harris, Sr., son of the first Poinsett County Judge, William Harris, donated land in 1856 for the new county seat. Thus the town of Harrisburg was named in his honor. In 1859 a brick courthouse was built in the center of the public square. The current Poinsett County Courthouse was built in 1918.

Harrisburg’s economy was dependent upon timber and agricultural products, but it was difficult for residents to ship their goods to market. The arrival of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad in 1882 provided a much-needed means of transportation to larger markets. By 1883 three railroad lines ran through Poinsett County (in addition to the St. Louis & Iron Mountain, the Texas & St. Louis RR ran through the western part of the county and the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis RR ran through the eastern part). This prompted commercial growth, and Harrisburg officially incorporated on February 24, 1883. Numerous sawmills, stave mills, and cotton gins were located in Harrisburg by the turn of the 20th century. Harrisburg’s economy continued to rely on a mixture of timber-related industries and agriculture throughout the early 20th century. The town continues to rely on agriculture today, with local farms growing rice, cotton, and soybeans.

Poinsett County Courthouse (IL on NR 11/10/1989)

An 1873 fire partially destroyed the first brick courthouse, and it took 12 years to repair the building. Another fire in 1917 completely consumed the courthouse, but luckily, a fireproof vault had been constructed on the north side of the courthouse and protected county records from the blaze. Only a month after this devastating fire, a new courthouse was designed by Pine Bluff architect Mitchell Selligman. Harrisburg prospered in the 1910s, so it was only appropriate for the town’s new courthouse to reflect that prosperity in its design. Selligman’s Classical Revival design features monumental entrances on the west and east elevations with triangular pediments supported by Corinthian columns. The courthouse also features Classically-inspired carvings, dentil courses, a cupola with clock faces, balustrades over the north and south wings, and a tile roof. The courthouse was completed in 1918, as you can see from the panel above the front door, which reads “Erected A.D. 1918” in roman numerals (MCMXVIII). Because of its

limestone construction and decorative appearance, the courthouse cost \$200,000 to build in 1917.

Courthouse Square Buildings

201 North Main St. (NC)

This Colonial Revival-style building was constructed ca. 1985 as Independence Federal Savings & Loan. It is currently the City of Harrisburg's Water & Gas Department. Interestingly, you used to be able to access the court square from the west on Center Street—the street bisected the courthouse square. But after this building was constructed, the street was closed. In early photos of the court square, this entire stretch of N. Main St. was filled with 1 and 2-story brick commercial buildings (with the exception of Center Street on this side). There was not this much open space or space between buildings, but three historic buildings on this side of the square burned in the 1980s.

119 N. Main St. (NC)

Poinsett Co. Health Dept.—new building, probably built within last 10 years. Historically, there were two 1-story brick buildings here to the north of 117 N. Main St. (Past Times Bar & Grill). These buildings housed dry goods and clothing stores in the early 20th century. You can still see where the roofline was on the north side of Past Times.

117 N. Main St. (C)

The exterior of this building is relatively unaltered from its early 20th century appearance. Of course, the storefront has been altered, but the overall exterior appearance is the same. It was probably built around 1905 and served as a clothing and hardware store until at least 1917. A concrete block addition on the rear of the building was built between 1909 and 1917 and served for many years as a grocery warehouse. This building is a good example of early 20th century commercial-style architecture with its decorative brick corbelling at the cornice. This building also has cast iron columns made by Mesker Bros. Front Builders, St. Louis, Missouri.

Mesker Building Components

From the late 1880s into the early 20th century, pre-manufactured building components became popular across the U.S. Buyers could order parts from a

catalogue and receive their goods by train. The prefabricated building parts were especially popular in small towns, where it might be difficult to find an architect. There were several companies in the Midwest manufacturing these cast iron building components, but the two largest manufacturers were Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis and the George L. Mesker Co. of Evansville, Indiana. The companies were owned by brothers and competed against each other. Whenever a building is called a “Mesker,” it means that the building features some ornamental metal component made by one of the Mesker companies. Mesker components typically have a nameplate at the base of a storefront column. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency has a project called “Got Mesker” that identifies and documents Mesker buildings across the country, and there are 2 identifiable Meskers in the Harrisburg CHD. The other Mesker is at 403-405 Court St. (old Murray’s City Barber Shop). Four other buildings in the district have cast iron columns without name plates, and there are at least 3 buildings that may have covered iron columns.

113-115 N. Main St. (C)

This building housed a racket store in 1909 and was a drug store from at least 1917 to 1927. It features decorative brick corbelling on its upper façade and MAY HAVE covered cast iron columns.

By 1909 (and probably earlier) brick commercial buildings went all the way from the southern wall of this building to the end of the block at South St. Just beyond this building to the south was a one-story building that housed a pool room and later a grocery store, a 2-story building that housed a hotel and meat market, a 1-story building that housed a confectionary and barber shop, and a 2-story building that housed a clothing store and later a drug store for several years.

401 Court St. (south side of square—C at time of survey, but not now due to fire damage—this building was demolished sometime between Nov. 29 and Dec. 11, 2010)

Built ca. 1900 and housed the W. C. Landers Grocery. In 1909 there was a small barber shop up in the front portion as well. The building has 4 unique fan-shaped windows on its western elevation. There were originally 3 window openings on the upper front façade, but they were altered at an unknown date...see bricked up window in center. Storefront altered. Fire happened recently—after the 2009 survey—building no longer extant.

403-405 Court St. (C)

Built ca. 1915 (between 1909 and 1917 for sure). Housed a barber in the western storefront in 1917 (same side as Murray's City Barber Shop). This building also has Mesker iron columns. Also has brick hood molding over second story windows, decorative grilles, and recessed panels on its upper façade.

Empty lot to east of this building (NC)

This site was formally occupied by a ca. 1905 2-story building that housed a grocery in 1909 and a movie theatre and restaurant in 1917. Gone before 2009 survey.

Down Main to 104 N. Main (NC)

Built ca. 1905. Housed a tailor in 1909 and a boot & shoe store in 1917. Has fan-shaped brick detailing in the cornice.

102 N. Main St. (C)

Built ca. 1910. Has cast iron columns. Housed a hay & flour store in 1917. Building has Italianate influence in the slightly arched window openings on its second story.

100 N. Main St. (C)

Built ca. 1890 and served as the Harrisburg State Bank, which is the earliest recorded bank in Harrisburg. In 1909 the bank was on the first floor, and a telephone exchange was on the second floor. Then the bank occupied the entire building until at least 1927. Building has some Italianate influence in its arched window openings with brick hood molding.

401 East South St. (Playschool Daycare--NC)

There was a filling station with 3 gas pumps here by 1927.

404 East South St. (NC)

Built ca. 1940, judging from the type of brick used. Non-contributing b/c of mansard awning at top of parapet.

411 E. South St. (C)

By 1909 there was a blacksmith and wagon shop on this corner. This building was built ca. 1925 and served as the second location for the R. A. Ford Grocery Store. Has iron columns and a pretty intact storefront with a recessed central door, transom windows, and wooden bulkheads.

101-103 E. South St. (NC)

Built ca. 1925, this was an automobile garage and filling station. It had a capacity of 20 cars and 2 gas pumps.

100 South East St. (C)

Built ca. 1915 as a 2-story building—you can barely see the outlines of 3 second story window openings—the upper portion of the building has been removed. There was a dry goods and furniture store here in 1917, and by 1920, this was home to Lamb Grocery Store. Still has some ghost signs on its southern elevation.

102 S. East St. (C)

Has iron columns. Built ca. 1915 as a hardware and grocery store.

104-106 S. East St. (C)

Built about 1920 and served as a feed warehouse. Before that, there was a large livery stable on this site (going back to at least 1909). The southern-most storefront at 104 S. East St. has iron columns. Building has nice brick corbelling at the cornice.

Harrisburg Bicentennial Park (NC)

The Harrisburg Bicentennial Park was dedicated in 1976 on the former site of a ca. 1915 2-story building. The brick appears to be recycled from a historic building (maybe even the building that once stood here). The land for the park was given to the city by Mr. and Mrs. Edward S. Maddox.

413 Court St. (just west of park--C)

There were some small wood-frame buildings on this lot from 1909 to 1927, including a shooting gallery in 1917. But this brick building wasn't constructed until about 1955. It was built to match the design of the ca. 1930 Collier and Jennings Law Office Building just to the west. This building at 413 Court was built to serve as the second location for the Bank of Harrisburg, which moved here in 1955 from its former location across the square at 211 N. Main. The Bank of Harrisburg became First National Bank, and then the building served as office space.

411 Court St. (C)

Built ca. 1930 and housed the Collier & Jennings Law Office. Features a nice stepped parapet with 3 rectangular designs made from rows of header and stretcher brick and cast concrete blocks at the corners.

108 South East St. (NC)

Historically, there was a 2-story grocery and clothing store situated in the middle of this part of the block (between Center St. and the edge of the brick building at 104-106 S. East St.). And there was a 2-story house behind it to the east. This modern metal building was built within the last 10-15 years.

202 S. East St. (NC)

The 2-story Hotel Vandiver was on this corner during the early 20th century. The current Municipal Building and Library was built in 1967.

635 S. East St. (NC)

Built ca. 1945. Served as the local office for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, which was an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. It was created in 1961 to administer programs concerning farm products and agricultural conservation. It granted loans to farmers; purchased farm products from farmers and processors; administered land allotment and marketing quota programs; shared the cost of resource conservation and environmental protection measures with farmers and ranchers; and supervised civil defense activities relating to food. In 1994 the ASCS was merged with other Agriculture agencies to create the Farm Service Agency.

NW corner of S. East St. & Market St. (parking lot)

By about 1905, this entire block of Market St. facing the courthouse was filled with 2-story brick commercial buildings, with the exception of one lot in the middle (where the pink stucco building is at 408 Market). This lot had a small, 1-story, wood-frame building on it until at least 1911.

But there were two 2-story buildings here on this vacant lot. The western-most building housed a clothing and variety store called the Chicago Store. And the eastern building had 2 storefronts—the one to the left housed the post office from at least 1909 to 1927, and the one to the right housed a grocery and bakery in 1917.

408 Market St. (C)

Built ca. 1915 on the one remaining lot in this block at that time. It was an automobile garage with a 20-car capacity and had one gas pump out in front.

406 Market St. (C)

Built ca. 1905. Housed a racket store in 1909 and a drug store in 1917. Nice Italianate-style influence in the arched window openings with brick hoods. This building might have covered iron columns on its storefront.

404 Market St. (C)

Built ca. 1905. Also might have covered iron columns on its storefront. Another nice commercial building with arched second story window openings and brick corbelling at the cornice. Housed a dry goods store until at least 1917.

402 Market St. (C)

Built ca. 1905. Nice Italianate detailing. Housed a grocery store in 1909 and 1917, but a 1911 photograph shows this building with a large sign painted on the front façade reading, “A. C. Thrower & Co. Furniture, Furniture for your Home.” Building housed doctor’s and dentist’s offices upstairs as well as a lawyer’s office in later years.

205 N. Main St. (C)

Built ca. 1930 and housed the Bank of Harrisburg until it moved in 1955 to the building at 413 Court St.

207-209 & 211 N. Main St. (C)

In 1917 there was a 1-story Dome Theatre building on this site, but it was gone by 1927. This building and the one north of it at 211 N. Main St. were probably built in the 1930s and exhibit typical characteristics of commercial buildings from that period—not much decorative detail.

303 N. Main St. (C)

Built about 1925 as a filling station with 2 gas pumps. It was called Graddy's Esso Station.

210 N. Main St. (C)

Built ca. 1915. In 1917 it housed a blacksmith and gristmill, but in 1927 it housed a movie theatre. Has rounded arch window openings on the second floor, similar to other buildings from that era in Harrisburg.

Empty lot between this building at the Modern News has always been vacant.

Modern News Building at 216 N. Main St. (IL on NR 6/18/1976)

Built in 1888 to house the newspaper business of L. D. Freeman, Sr. As the paper's circulation increased, more space was needed, so a 15-foot addition was built on the rear of the building in 1910. Another 15-foot addition was necessary in 1952. And in 1953 a new brick veneer was added to the front façade to give the building a more modern look. The 1888 façade was more ornate with decorative panels and brick corbelling at the cornice.

The Modern News newspaper was established by L. D. Freeman, Sr., in 1888 and has continued uninterrupted operation since that time by the Freeman family. The newspaper is one of the oldest weekly newspapers to be operated by the same family in the U.S. For this reason, it was listed on the NR in 1976.