

**Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
“Walks Through History”
Tour of Keo Historic Commercial District
Begin at the Cobb Gin Complex, Main and Fleming Streets
April 15, 2017
By Revis Edmonds**



Good morning, my name is Revis Edmonds, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, one of eight agencies of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of the Keo Historic Commercial District. This tour script is drawn extensively from Holly Hope’s National Register of Historic Places nomination of the Keo Commercial Historic District, and I would like to acknowledge her original research on the nomination. I’d like to thank our statewide partner, the Arkansas Humanities Council for co-sponsoring this and future Walks Through History Tours throughout our state.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 2 hours of HSW (health, safety and welfare) continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you're interested.

There are a total of twenty-nine contributing places within the Keo Historic Commercial District, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 15, 2011. We will talk about all of these during our tour today.

Brief History of Keo

Keo is located on U.S. Highway 165, twenty-three miles south of North Little Rock and five miles north of England. The district consists of three blocks of the west side of Main Street and is bounded on the north by Arkansas Highway 232 and on the south by Fleming Street.¹ The west boundary is the alley behind the commercial buildings and the east boundary is the east side of Main Street. The period of significance for the district is 1900-61. The commercial buildings are represented by Standard 20th Century architecture and Plain Traditional industrial-agricultural styles.

The area of Keo has been known by three names. The first recorded location of Keo was Cobbs, which was one mile north of U.S.165 on Arkansas Highway 15. Nothing is left of that settlement and the area is now mostly farms and late twentieth-century homes.

As in the communities of England and Lonoke, the railroad became the center of residential and commercial life. Keo was established when the Altheimer-Argenta

¹ National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Keo Commercial Historic District."
<http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/National-Register-Listings/PDF/LN0239.nr.pdf>

branch of the St. Louis, Arkansas and Texas Railway was laid to the west of U.S. 165 between 1887 and 1888. The rail line name was changed to the St. Louis Southwestern Railway (Cotton Belt) when the “robber baron” Jay Gould purchased it in 1891.

In 1884 the Southwestern Improvement Association offered land and lots along the line and was advertised as an investment free from "blizzards, cyclones, droughts, floods or malaria, no intense heats or bitter cold spells." Although the area avoided blizzards, most of the other climatic scenarios eventually² came to fruition.

The rumors of railroad construction in Lonoke County prompted J.W. Brodie to purchase property in Dunham Station. It was reported that when the neighboring community of England was reached by rail a township committee under John C. England began to lay out lots for development.

Lafayette Cobb was recorded as the first postmaster for the Cobbs Post Office in 1880, and it soon became known as Lafayette Township, which had six gins. Cobb was also the justice of the peace and owner of the general store. As the rail line stretched north toward Argenta, Dunham Station celebrated its re-naming the community Keo after Miss Keo Dooley, whose father owned farmland there.³

A post office was established in Keo by 1889 and the area had experienced serious growth as 100 people then resided at Cobbs and 200 at Keo. Cobb had branched out and opened a second general store in Keo, and Cobbs began to

² National Register of Historic Places nomination, “Keo Commercial Historic District.”

³ Holly Hope, “Keo Commercial Historic District.” The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture.” <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=7508>

decline. The Cobbs Post Office was closed in 1916, and Keo incorporated the same year.

According to the National Register nomination, the forty-one-mile Altheimer to Argenta line was the catalyst for commercial growth in Keo because it allowed the farmers who raised cotton, corn and oats in to get their goods to market in Little Rock. The first cotton gin in Keo was owned by residents Morris and Brodie (the Morris is possibly an ancestor of the founders of the Morris Gin Complex.). In 1898 Moren and Adams were recorded as being co-owners of a gin. By 1906 Morris and Moren became partners in a gin near the Cobb Complex. The draw of the railroad became obvious as business and residents moved south to the rails. From 1892, the hotel at Keo accommodated travelers on the railroad, as well as residents needing temporary homes and drummers making the rounds of the towns on the line. In 1913 the hotel was managed by Mrs. E.V. Bryant and was advertised as "the best the market affords,"⁴ and served food to the customers in "large dishes."⁵ The hotel was usually filled to capacity.

By 1913 Samuel Cobb had started his own shingle factory and sawmill along with his store and gin. The shingle factory provided jobs for his gin laborers, who were out of work during the off-season.

In 1910-11, the St. Louis Southwestern Railway (Cotton Belt Route) Depot in Coy was remodeled and is very similar to the Keo Depot, which was located north of the Cobb Gin. In the 1950s the depot was moved about a half block south on

⁴ National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Keo Commercial Historic District."

⁵ Ibid.

Main Street and was moved before 1991 to the town of Scott where it was destroyed in a fire.

In late 1913, it was reported that a large part of the buildings in that row had been destroyed by an early morning fire, but Keo was able to rebuild. By 1926 the town suffered another fire that began in the post office, which was thought to be the work of an arsonist, and the brick buildings seen on Main Street today were built to replace those that were destroyed. The Hotel Keo, which was near the current site of City Hall and the Post Office, survived the 1913 fire only to fall victim to the 1926 blaze, along with the Baptist Church next door.

In the Great Flood of 1927, Keo was spared catastrophic damage because it was located in a dry pocket extending south from Scott toward Tucker. The water did rise to the west of town, lapped at the commercial area, and enveloped it on all sides.

In the late 1980s the Cotton Belt route was pulled up, but by that time most industries had converted to trucking for transport of goods. The post office remained but was moved northwest in 1996. The Masonic lodge, which replaced the hotel, was torn down in 1989 and the City Hall was built on that site.

Tourism in the area picked up in the 1980s with the construction of the visitor center at Toltec Mounds State Park between Scott and Keo. In 1985 the Department of Parks and Tourism rehabbed a 1912 general store building for the Plantation Agriculture Museum in Scott. Near the museum, Cotham's Restaurant opened in 1984. Installed in an early 20th century general store with a view of an oxbow lake, the restaurant became a favored eating spot for the state's

politicians, including Bill Clinton and David Pryor, and for travelers across the country. Keo became known in recent years for its marketing of antiques, with the largest dealer, Morris Antiques, operating a 10-building complex including space for sales and restoration. In 1992 Charlotte Bowls opened Charlotte's Eats and Sweets in the Cobb Building on Main Street. Charlotte's has remained well known to tourists. These brought an increase in visitors but the population by 2007 remained at 281. As in much of the region, agriculture is the area's driving economic force, primarily in the raising of catfish, cotton and peanuts.

1. Cobb Cotton Gin Complex

The Cobb Cotton Gin is still a fixture in Keo even though no cotton is ginned in the facility. The complex consisting of twenty-two buildings and structures retains several resources that date from the turn of the century, the 1920s and the 1950s. Two of the original seed houses were destroyed in a fire, but most resources associated with the original gin remain. The wooden gin was torn down in 1946 and a new building was constructed with corrugated asbestos siding and roofing to make it fireproof. This busy gin cleaned and separated Delfos cotton up to the 1960s, with DP&L and Stoneville cotton up to 2008. The Cobbs sold the cotton gin to Yarbrough Brothers in 1954 and they retained ownership through 1970, branching out to soybean storage and sales and a dump pit, with silos constructed north of the gin. The slow output of the gin brought an end to operations in 2008. By that time modern gins could produce 100 bales an hour while Cobb's produced twenty an hour. Bodie Cobb still administers farmland,

but the gin and related outbuildings are used mainly for storage and selling pecans.

a. Cobb Cotton Gin

The 1946 Cobb Cotton Gin is the centerpiece of the ginning complex that anchors the southern end of the district. The largest of the twenty-two structures and buildings in the complex, it is a gable-roofed building. The front, west facade of the gin is fenestrated from north to south with a single leaf metal door featuring a one-over-one light. Adjacent to the door are two metal windows with a configuration of four-over-two lights. The bottom sash is a hopper type, while the top sash is an awning-type. Double-leaf sliding doors with one-over-one lights open into the ginning floor next to two windows, a single-leaf door with one-over one light and a row of three windows at the southwest corner. All openings are shaded by a full cantilevered corrugated asbestos awning supported by metal trusses and two metal posts at the area of the double doors. The suck pipe for drawing cotton out of trucks is housed in a gable-roofed dormer over the double doors. The loft area above the awning is fenestrated by five four-light hopper windows that open to the interior by pulling on a chain on the gin floor. The south elevation features sliding double doors with two-over-two lights at the southwest corner and a single window at the southeast. A shed-roofed projection extends approximately five feet and is accessed by a single-leaf paneled metal door. A second shed-roofed addition sheathed in vertical metal siding projects approximately twenty feet. A single window

is adjacent to a third shed-roofed projection original to the cotton gin. A single-leaf metal door opens into the projection, which is open at the upper level and houses a large pipe leading from the interior ginning floor. A wooden gangplank leads from the double doors at the northeast to the Cobb Cotton Bale House. According to Bodie Cobb, the gin had a maximum output of 20 bales an hour at its height but ultimately could not keep up with modern gins.⁶

b. Cobb Cotton Seed House 1

Cobb Cotton Seed House 1 is sheathed in board-and-batten and has a corrugated metal roof, and has a foundation of concrete "bell" piers. A thin, shed-roofed dormer housing a pipe extends from the roof in the center of the building. The western facade from north to south features a shed extension with a single-leaf board-and-batten door opening onto a small wooden dock reached by wooden steps. An adjacent open shed extension covers exterior equipment.

c. Cobb Cotton Seed House 2

The western elevation of the Cobb Cotton Seed House 2, built around 1900, features a full metal awning supported by wooden brackets, which covers three openings enclosed with wooden casement sashes. The eastern elevation from south to north has four board-and-batten casement openings. At the point where the building adjoins Seed House

⁶ Site visit and talk with Bodie Cobb, February 21, 2016.

1, a single-leaf door reached by three wooden steps opens into a small recessed space.

d. Cobb Cotton Bale House

The Cobb Cotton Bale House was built about 1900 and is linked to the double doors at the northeast corner of the cotton gin by a wooden gangplank. The gable-roofed structure is sheathed in corrugated metal sheets with a corrugated metal roof and is supported by a foundation of wooden piers. A small metal dormer with gable roof extends from the northern end of the building. The front elevation features three sliding metal doors. The center door opens onto a small wooden loading dock connected to the gangplank.

e. Cobb Cotton Cleaner Building

The contributing Cobb Cotton Cleaner Building is located south of the Cobb Cotton Gin and was constructed about 1900. The gabled building covered in board-and batten siding features a standing-seam metal roof and a foundation of concrete-block piers.

The front facade is fenestrated from east to west with two board-and batten casement openings, a centered sliding double door of board-and-batten and two casement openings at the northwest corner. The west elevation features a centered sliding double door. The fenestration on the south elevation mirrors that on the north.

f. Cobb Quonset Hut

The Cobb Quonset Hut is located west of the Cobb Cotton Cleaner Building. The hut is sheathed in corrugated metal and features a poured-concrete foundation. This 1950s building situated south of the gin across Fleming Street. The front, north elevation from east to west is fenestrated with two six-light steel hopper windows. A double-leaf metal sliding door protrudes slightly from the center of this elevation. Four single-light hopper windows open into the crawlspace beneath the hut. A section of a wooden trough protrudes from the building over the door. The south elevation features five windows and four crawlspace windows.

g. Cobb Storage Building

This building was constructed in the early 1900s. The building is located north of the Cobb Quonset Hut and south of the Gin and Fleming Street. The rectangular building with a standing-seam metal roof is placed on a foundation of concrete-block piers. It is covered in weatherboard. The front facade features a wooden double-door. A wood slat gate is placed on the northwest corner of an open shed extension. The west elevation is sheltered by a full shed overhang supported by two wooden posts. The northwest corner of the overhang is enclosed with a wood slat fence. Three casement openings of wood are located beneath the overhang.

h. Cobb Cotton Seed House 3

The early 1900s Seed House 3 fronts on Fleming Street and is located directly north of the Cobb Storage Building. The building has a metal gabled roof and is sheathed in a combination of corrugated metal sheets

and vertical board. A metal smokestack is situated on the north end of the roof. The foundation consists of concrete "bell" piers. The front features a centered single-leaf metal door. A pipe leads from Seed House 3 to the gin across Fleming Street. The west elevation is sheathed in vertical wood siding and is fenestrated from north to south with five wooden casement openings and a single-leaf wooden door with crossbuck bracing at the southwest corner. The pediment of the building is covered in metal sheets while below the overhang the wall is covered in vertical board.

i. Cobb Fire Hose House

The Cobb Fire Hose House, built in the early 1900s, is situated just to the north of Seed House 3 and south of the gin. The Fire Hose House is a small gable-roofed structure containing a wooden spool for a fire hose. It is sheathed in weatherboard and has a standing seam metal roof.

j. Cobb Water Tank

The Cobb Water Tank is located southwest of the gin and was constructed in the 1920s. The structure consists of a cylindrical metal tank atop a steel lattice support with a central pipe.

k. Cobb Cotton Pen

The 1940s Cobb Cotton Pen is north of the water tank and south of Fleming Street. The Cotton Pen is a small, square structure of weatherboard with a gabled metal roof. A single-leaf wooden door opens

into the north elevation. A wooden hopper opening is located above the door.

I. Cobb Commissary

The Cobb Commissary is located to the west of the Cotton Pen and fronts on Fleming Street. The early 1900s building on a foundation of concrete bell piers is sheathed in board-and-batten siding and has a corrugated-metal gable roof. A chimney chase on the hip of the roof is built of buff brick. The commissaries often became one of the centers of activity in these kinds of “cotton towns” due to the fact that all the necessities of the town’s existence were obtained here.

m. Cobb Cotton Gin Laborer House

The Cobb Cotton Gin Laborer House, built in 1959, is located to the south of Fleming Street and west of the gin. The house is a small Craftsman building with a standing-seam metal gable roof on a foundation of concrete bell piers. It is covered in ashlar masonry asphalt roll siding. The Laborer House is considered contributing because it is an example of laborer housing that employees of the Cobb cotton gin would have inhabited. There are few such houses remaining in the area that have not been altered, and many were destroyed in the 1960s and 1970s.

n. Cobb Cotton Truck Scale

The 1946 Cobb Cotton Truck Scale is located directly west of the Cobb Scale House. This structure consists of a wooden pad covered by a flat metal roof supported by five metal poles. It is the original structure that was built to accommodate wagons and teams of horses.

o. Cobb Scale House

The contributing Cobb Scale House was built in 1946 and is located on the west side of Main Street, directly west of the Cobb Cotton Gin. The Cobb Scale House is sheathed in wood grain, wavy-butts asbestos shingles.

The front, east façade of the Cobb Scale House is fenestrated from south to north with three pairs of six-over-six double-hung windows. The wall steps back approximately eight feet on the northeast corner of the building and is lit by a single window. The northwest corner of this elevation is constructed of brick as this is where the safe is located inside the building.

p. Cobb Sample Shop House

The 1950 Cobb Sample Shop House is north of the Cobb Scale House and west of the gin. The small square building with flat roof and monitor light is constructed of cinder block. The front facade is accessed by a single-leaf door with one light.

q. Cobb Shop Building

The 1920 Cobb Shop Building is sheathed in board-and-batten siding. The building is rectangular with a standing-seam metal gabled roof. The Cobb

Shop Building is located north of the Cobb Sample Shop House and west of the Cobb Cotton Gin across Main Street.

r. **Cobb Tool Shed**

The circa 1920 Cobb Tool Shed is located at the northeast corner of the Shop Building. The small square structure has a shed roof and is considered contributing. It is sheathed in board-and-batten siding.

s. **Cobb Truck Dump Pit**

Located to the northeast of the gin, this was built in 1954 and was used in conjunction with the soybean elevator. The contributing pit is a square shed-roofed structure used to house soybean trucks while the bed was filled with soybean products from a pipe in the roof running from the elevator. The structure is sheathed in corrugated metal siding and features a full, poured concrete foundation. Concrete ramps lead to large double-leaf metal doors on the north and south.

t. **Cobb Soybean Elevator**

The 1954 five-tank structure is located to the east of the Dump Pit. The tanks are constructed of corrugated steel and attached to the dump pit by pipes.

2. **Main Street Buildings**

a. **Bank of Keo/H.A. Coleman**

The Bank of Keo and H.A. Coleman Building at 366-360 Main Street is north of the Garnett Store. This two-bay Standard 20th Century Commercial building is rectangular and is sheathed in brick and stucco. It features a flat roof of built-up tar. The building was constructed in 1926. The front, east façade has a full shed porch supported by six metal poles beneath the square pediment. The pediment displays the names of the historic businesses painted in white on a black square. The Bank of Keo occupied the southern bay and H.A. Coleman the northern bay. Fenestration from south to north on the Bank of Keo consists of a pair of one-light stationary windows, a one-light double-leaf door and a second pair of windows.

b. S.C. Cobb Building

The S.C. Cobb Building at 326 Main Street was constructed in circa 1926. The rectangular brick Standard 20th-Century Commercial building with flat roof has the historic name, "S.C. Cobb," painted in white letters on the square pediment on the front elevation. Four small concrete squares flank the area of the building's name, two on the north and two on the south. A transom consisting of nine frosted glass openings is located above a full, flat-roofed porch supported by four wooden posts. From south to north fenestration under the porch consists of a pair of stationary one light windows, a beveled

entry bay with a northern-facing window, a double-leaf one light door, a southern-facing window and a pair of windows facing east.

c. Cobb Building

The Cobb Building at 290 Main Street, is an irregular brick Standard 20th Century Commercial building. The building reflects its 1926 construction and the front is covered with a full, flat-roofed porch supported by ten wood posts. The southern bay displays a concrete date/name stone at the pediment reading "19COBB26." Two decorative attic vents flank the date/name stone. Transom windows are still extant under a covering of wood. Beneath the porch overhang this bay is fenestrated south to north with a one-light stationary window, a beveled recessed entry featuring stationary windows flanking a single-leaf, one-light door and a second stationary window. The south elevation is fenestrated west to east by a four-over-four double-hung window, a one-light single-leaf door with transom, a second window, a single-leaf paneled door with transom, a boarded-up window, a single-leaf door with transom and two one-over-one, vinyl, double-hung windows flanking a third door with transom. Charlotte's Eats and Sweets is located at the north end of the building.

d. Morris Building, 280-274 Main Street

The south bay of the two-bay building features a concrete date/name stone reading "1926 MORRIS," and two decorative attic vents above

the boarded-up transom windows. The entry to this bay is recessed and is flanked by one-light stationary windows. The front door is a one-light single-leaf entry. The northern bay has only two attic vents above the boarded-up transom windows. The display windows and recessed front door are boarded over. A full, flat overhang extends the length of the two front bays.

A mural advertising Barq's Root Beer is painted on the northeast corner of this elevation. The name E.D. Wilson is painted above it. A depiction of Leake's Liniment is also painted on this wall.⁷ The murals are late-20th century works. A circa 1960s brick extension on the northwest corner of the rear, west elevation has a gabled roof.

3. Morris Cotton Gin Complex

The Morris Cotton Gin on the north end of Main Street was constructed around 1940. Today the complex consists of four buildings. Two seed houses remain on the old railroad bed but Dean Morris stated that there were others, which were torn down at an unknown date. The Cobb gin sold seed, which Morris did not, so Cobb had more associated outbuildings. The Morris gin displays the one-and-one-half story plan of the Cobb gin but it is sheathed in corrugated steel. Morris closed for business in 1970 and the buildings were vacant until 1998, when Old Gin Antiques moved in.

a. Morris Cotton Gin

⁷ Site visit.

The Morris Cotton Gin was built in 1940. The gable-roofed gin is sheathed in corrugated metal with a metal roof. The front elevation of the gin is the location of the former cotton dock and is fenestrated west to east by a six-light steel hopper window and a double-leaf, one-light door. The glass entry doors are covered by a pair of metal sliding doors. A full metal awning is cantilevered over a concrete pad. The loft area is fenestrated by two four-light steel hopper windows, with a full cantilevered awning over the east elevation. The loft features a gable-roof dormer for the suck pipe. Two four-light windows open into the loft level on the south of the dormer and four windows open to the north of the dormer. A second gabled dormer rises from the roof north of the first dormer.

b. Morris Seed House 1

The Morris Seed House 1 is located northwest of the gin. The rectangular building covered in corrugated metal with gabled metal roof was built about 1940. The south facade is covered by a shed-roofed overhang supported by eight wooden posts. The building is fenestrated west to east by an opening with no glass, a single-leaf metal door and three six-light steel hopper windows. A gable-roofed dormer for housing equipment projects from the pediment onto the overhang. A single-leaf metal door is centered in this elevation beneath the covering. The north elevation features a centered gabled extension.

c. Morris Seed House 2

The Morris Seed House 2 is located to the west of the gin. The building is a rectangular board-and-batten structure with a metal gable roof on a foundation of concrete bell piers. The building was constructed around 1940.

The south elevation features one large board-and-batten door. The east elevation is fenestrated with six board-and-batten casement openings. The west is fenestrated by a single-leaf door and five casement openings.

d. Morris Scale House

The 1940 Morris Scale House is situated to the east of the gin on U.S. 165. The scale house is sheathed in wood grain wavy-butt asbestos shingles (which are formed into parallel ridges or furrows so as to form a symmetrically wavy surface). The front, western facade of the house is fenestrated north to south by two paneled single-leaf doors, a six-over-six double-hung window, a third single-leaf door and a window at the southwest corner. The east elevation is fenestrated south to north by a composite one-light picture window flanked by two four-over-four double hung windows, a bay for viewing the trucks on the scale lit by three one-light stationary windows and a single-leaf paneled door.

e. Jessie W. Cobb Office Building

The circa 1900 Jessie Cobb Office Building was moved to the southeast corner of Main and Highway 232 in 1991 from the Jessie W. Cobb House two blocks southwest of its current location. The move does not impact the building's integrity because it is still located in Keo and is in the vicinity of Main Street as it was previously.

The building is a small square structure covered in board-and-batten siding with a metal gabled roof on concrete bell piers. The front, eastern façade is shaded by a full, shed porch supported by three square posts. It is fenestrated from south to north by a single-leaf one-light door and a four-over-four double-hung window.

Again, on behalf of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, I want to thank you for joining us this beautiful Saturday in Central Arkansas. If you are able, please join us for our next “Walks Through History” tour of 2017 at Hope, as we explore the amazing architecture and history of the Downtown Hope Commercial District in Hempstead County. We begin at 11 AM on Saturday, May 13 at Hope City Hall.

And just a reminder, if you are dining out after the tour, be sure to patronize your locally owned establishments. You'll love the taste, and you're building a better community!