

Walks through History



Columbia Street, Historic Helena April 14, 2018 Led by Holly Hope

Introduction

Welcome to the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's Columbia Street Walks Through History Tour sponsored by Main Street Helena.

This tour is a collaborative effort today. Many people are helping out and have provided information to share with you so I want to say thank you to;

Shane Williams, Executive Director Main Street Helena

Debra Smith, Historic Sites Manager Delta Cultural Center

Cornelius Borum, Helena Heights Complex manager

Donna Parker, Helena-West Helena Welcome Center Manager and member of St. Mary's Church

Mark Christ, AHPP Community Outreach Director

David Collins, AHPP intern

Initiation for Shane Williams to speak

We will be visiting several structures today and walking about 3 ½ blocks to the intersection of York and Columbia Streets so if you need a ride we can provide you with one. You can let David Collins, our intern, know if you need to ride.

We're starting here at the Old Helena High School. From here we will walk down the street to St. Mary's Catholic Church designed by Charles Eames. Miss Donna Parker will speak to us in the sanctuary about St. Mary's and the history of architect Charles Eames.

From there we will head to the intersection of Elm and Columbia where we will turn left and go over to the Fort Curtis reconstruction, Centennial Baptist Church and then to the Moore-Hornor House.

The Moore-Hornor house is right in the middle of Civil War re-enactment activities that are going on today. The war begins at 12, but we will be spending some time down here so the shooting might be over by the time we get there.

We will take a look at the National Historic Landmark Centennial Baptist Church then at the fort we will be met by Mark Christ of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program and he will talk about the Civil War history of Helena.

Debra Smith, Manager of Historic Properties with the Delta Cultural Center will be speaking to us about the history of the Moore-Hornor House and then you may check out some of the other activities going on today. You also have brochures with other things to see in Helena, which include the Delta Cultural Center Museum, the Delta Cultural Center Education Annex and Battery C.

If you are wanting to attend the tea at the Pillow-Thompson House, please note that you need to register.

Helena History

Today we are in one of the most historic towns in the Arkansas Delta. The history of Helena-West Helena began with its situation on the river. This was a major draw for settlers because the St. Francis River and the Mississippi were like a modern freeway interchange.

Many of the earliest settlers came here because they received military land warrants for serving in the war of 1812. Some came because of certificates of purchase, receiving public land from the U.S. Government or because they had New Madrid Certificates for land destroyed by the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-1812. Also, it was good land for raising cotton.

Many of the early folks who came here for those reasons settled in an area called Utica, which was situated at the mouth of the St. Francis River from 1817-1820.

The most significant influence on the formation of Helena was the purchase of Spanish land grants by William Patterson, who had come to the area in 1800, and Sylvanus Phillips who moved here around 1815.

Partners Sylvanus Phillips and William Russell founded Helena in the east part of their grant. They allocated 275 acres of the east section of the grant for a town site with 701 numbered lots.

In 1816 Patterson's claim was surveyed to the south of the Phillips' grant. In that year most of Patterson's grant had been cleared and houses were being constructed as well as fields plowed.

In 1820 the Territorial Legislature took part of Arkansas County and created Phillips County named after Sylvanus Phillips. The scope of the original county encompassed an area that now consists of 11 counties. Also in that year the legislature permitted the creation of a town on 640 acres of Phillips' claim and platting and surveying began. After the name Utica was dropped for the settlement it was called Monticello. It was also called St. Francis at one time but by whatever name this site was always the county seat.

In 1833 after Phillips' death the town was incorporated as Helena. It was named after his daughter who died in 1831. In 1836 the first addition to the town was located on William Patterson's claim. This was called New Helena and Phillips' claim was then called Old Helena.

In 1836 there were reports of complaints from citizens about Helena's development being stunted because Phillips' heirs owned a good portion of the

lots and people didn't want to build on rented land. The family still owned many of the building lots up to the Civil War but some of them had been sold off so some owner-occupied building occurred at that time.

The location of a government land office in Helena in 1836 attracted immigrants to the area. A lot of those folks had already made their fortunes by the time they got here. Because of this influx and increase in business and building, the value of land in Helena rose.

The same feature that attracted people to the area – water – also caused problems for the new residents. Besides the flooding from the Mississippi there was an issue with drainage from the hills, overflow from various springs as well as a cypress swamp in the middle of the town. The developers were aware of the problems of flooding and poor drainage from the beginning. They mitigated the problems by implementing drainage and providing for construction of a levee on the river.

Initially intensive farming occurred west of town on the hills of Crowley's Ridge as did a lot of construction because of the flooding issue. Farmers in that area began to build levees and drain the land, which allowed agriculture to move south.

Helena remained small in comparison to another riverfront town, Memphis, because most people lived to the east of Crowley's Ridge, which didn't provide a lot of building room. A small number of farmers obtained a large share of the agricultural land, so there wasn't much available for construction. That being said, Helena was considered one of the larger towns in this area of the Delta.

A business sector grew from Water Street and Ohio Street, which is along the levee. Today, Ohio Street ends at York Street but it extended a few more blocks south originally.

Ohio Street was a mixture of residential and commercial structures and some of the largest homes were built there but the erosion and flooding problems led people to move away from that area in the mid-1860s.

The cotton and timber industry of Helena flourished from 1826 into the 20th century and steamboats made Helena a stopover point because it was located between Memphis, Tennessee and Vicksburg, MS. This helped to expand the cotton and timber industry and allowed the economy to grow.

Further growth was made possible because Helena was protected by the hills of Crowley's Ridge and there were high roads to the town that allowed passage during flooding periods.

CIVIL WAR

I'm going to skip over in-depth Civil War history at this point because Mark Christ is going to tell us more about that at Fort Curtis but I will say that Helena didn't suffer as much as other towns because of the occupation of the Union Army.

AFTER THE WAR

After the war the Iron Mountain and Helena Railroad came through in 1870 and through the years several other railroads serviced the area, which facilitated economic growth by boosting Phillips County as the timber belt of the state.

In 1879, Congress created the Mississippi River Commission to establish a unified flood control plan. In cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the commission's goal was to build higher levees based on previous flood heights and improve their quality. Between 1905 and 1915, the Arkansas General Assembly passed laws to create a program of flood control in Arkansas's Mississippi River Valley.

The St. Francis drainage district was formed in 1893. The Cotton Belt levee and the White River levee closed the gap by 1896. This provided Helena with protection from flooding.

Helena had its first telephone, received electricity by 1888, and the town had a water reservoir in the hills, which provided drinking water and water for fire protection.

Mark Twain noted in 1883 that Helena possessed “lumber and grain commerce, a foundry, oil mills, machine shops and wagon factories and two railways.” He described it as “the commercial center of a broad and prosperous region.” This era through the beginning of the 20th century was the zenith for Helena. Many jobs were created by the lumber industry and education, religious and commercial construction expanded.

This area around the high school was known as the Silk Stocking district, which was home to industrialists and cotton brokers so many of the more ornate homes that resulted from the robust economy were situated around here.

WEST HELENA

Around 1907 Helena’s administrators purchased 2,300 acres of land from the Clopton Plantation to the northwest. This area was incorporated in 1917 as West Helena.

There were several timber industries located in West Helena and in addition they had an amusement park, a theater, a band stand and a zoo.

In the 1920s Helena and West Helena began to experience an economic downturn. It began with the eighteenth Amendment to the constitution, which prohibited the manufacture, sale or transportation of alcohol in 1920. This impacted companies that produced wooden items like barrel staves, which of course impacted the lumber industry.

Also automobiles took over from wooden wagons. For a while, local companies produced some of the wooden elements for cars but that soon changed. Another negative impact was that metal buckets replaced wooden buckets.

The floods of 1927 and 1937 damaged infrastructure in both towns, which led them to lose their place in the national lumber market. Of course the Depression also curtailed the industry and agriculture of the area.

The population of Helena had been falling until WWII. Helena and West Helena acquired 640 acres located north of the airport at West Helena for the base of operations at a primary contract flying school. Plans were made for two auxiliary

fields to be situated from five to seven miles distance from the base. The school started operations in the fall of 1941 as Helena Aero Tech but it was dedicated as Thompson-Robbins Field in December. At the peak of operations 255 students were enrolled. A total of 3,985 men from the school were graduated to basic flying schools by 1944, which was the year it closed.

There was also a prisoner of war work camp on the county fairgrounds in West Helena in 1942 that held Italian POWs then German prisoners.

Today, Helena is probably best known for its blues roots. In 1941 the first radio station in Helena, KFFA began broadcasting. Blues musicians Robert Lockwood, Jr. and Sonny Boy Williamson came to the owner and suggested a blues radio show featuring local artists. Once they obtained a sponsor the King Biscuit Time radio program went on the air.

In 1951 host Sunshine Sonny Payne came to work at the station. Sonny Payne continued in this role until his death this year. The King Biscuit Time program was one of the longest-running radio shows in history and was awarded a George Peabody Award for outstanding achievement in radio and broadcast journalism.

In 1986 Main Street Helena put on the first King Biscuit Blues Festival. The three-day music festival continues today.

By the 20th century Helena was struggling after the advent of agricultural mechanization, reduced Mississippi River port traffic and manufacturing job loss with the closure of the Mohawk Rubber Company in the 1970s, which caused a surge in unemployment.

In 2005, Helena and West Helena were consolidated and revitalization projects were proposed:

As a result a new Boys and girls Club was constructed in West Helena and a second was constructed in Helena.

Jobs were created by the establishment of a biodiesel facility and a sweet potato facility.

The population started growing in 1950 and has risen every year since.

There has also been an emphasis on heritage tourism with the establishment of bed and breakfasts, a new visitor's center, the Delta Cultural Center Museum, Delta cultural Center Education Annex, the Main Street Helena program, the formation of Freedom Park, Battery C Park, and the Fort Curtis reconstruction.

Helena High School

This is the old Helena High School completed in 1912. It was constructed in the Classical Revival style. What makes it Classical is the terra cotta detail seen on the front façade as well as the belt courses and details in contrasting brick.

The oculus windows at the upper floor always had square double-hung windows in them but they were bigger originally. There are some details missing because the building had reached an advanced state of deterioration by 2013 when restoration work was begun. I am passing around a photo of the original building so you can see some of the missing elements. Also photos of the building before restoration began.

The terra cotta surround around the recessed entry is original with egg and dart detail and scroll work as are the alcoves on either side of the entrance.

You see a couple of terra cotta scrolls on the sides of the entrance. Originally there was a large ornate drip mold, which is a molded panel over the entrance with projecting elements that came down and joined those scroll brackets. The original detail is missing and the connecting elements to the brackets are gone but the current mold approximates the size and shape of the original.

Also at the top floor there was a continuous projecting cornice of blocks called dentils as well as projecting decorative elements in the center where you see the triangular pediment. You can see the shadow-line of those elements. The triangular projection was destroyed but was recreated in 2013. It originally had a terra cotta medallion at the top.

The school had the smallest gymnasium in the state and while kids were working out they had to cover the radiators with mattresses. The football team's practice

field was on the current site of the Fort Curtis reconstruction in the 1920s after the circa 1890s African American Peabody School was torn down.

The high school was opened in 1912 on the site of the Hindman House. Thomas Hindman moved to Helena from Mississippi in 1856 where he set up a law practice. During the Civil War he raised a regiment and became a colonel and later a brigadier general. After the war and a failed attempt to practice law and start a coffee plantation in Mexico, he returned to Helena, where he was shot through the window of his home in 1868 by an unknown assailant.

Hindman's house had become deteriorated by the turn of the century so it was torn down for construction of the school, which served students from Helena and West Helena.

JEFFERSON SCHOOL

Between the 1850s and Reconstruction there were a lot of private schools in the area. By the 1880s the town experienced a building boom and new schools were part of the growth.

Among other early schools in Helena was the Jefferson School. The school began as a frame structure on stilts at the SW corner of Pecan and Porter. This building burned in 1885 but a new school was constructed on the site. While it was under construction the children were taught in the second story of buildings on Cherry Street but they did start attending classes before it was completed.

The second school was a large two-story brick structure with a mansard roof, clock tower and Gothic details. The clock in the tower was a Seth Thomas clock that was wound by hand until the 1930s. The bell from the tower is now in front of the Helena Museum of Phillips County. In 1912 when the Helena High school was built Jefferson was used for grades 1-6. The building stood on the lot until 1950 when it was destroyed for a Safeway store.

A third Jefferson School for grades 1-6 was built on the site of the Fort Curtis Reconstruction in the 1950s. Its remains were on the site in 2011 when it was razed for the reconstruction.

PEABODY SCHOOL & ELIZA MILLER SCHOOL

The African American Peabody School for grades 1-12 was built in the 1890s on the lot that now holds the Fort Curtis Reconstruction and was destroyed in the 1920s. In 1926 the Eliza Miller High School for African Americans was built on land purchased from the Sacred Heart Academy. This school was a one-story brick Colonial Revival structure that stood at the corner of Don and Phillips Streets. It became a Jr. High in 1970 and was destroyed in 1978. There is now a park on the site dedicated to Eliza Miller who was an African American businesswoman and educator.

Miller opened the Plaza Theater in downtown Helena in 1913. Her son took over the management of the theater until the 1930s when she took back her position as manager and ran it until she died in 1938. Miller also served on the board of trustees of the Arkansas Baptist College and in 2003 she and her family in House Concurrent Resolution 1028: "Recognizing and Commending the Miller Family."

CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

In 1948 Central High School was constructed on Oakland Avenue to the west of downtown Helena. This was for Helena and West Helena's high school kids but they had a choice as to whether they wanted to attend school in Helena or West Helena and there was one yearbook for both locations.

By the 1950s the Helena High School became a Jr. High and it closed in the 1970s. The building was used for storage and fell into an advanced state of deterioration. By the 2000s part of the roof had fallen in and the gym floor had collapsed. It had been used to store barrels of anti-freeze for the school district busses. Bricks were shearing off the exterior but the concrete construction of the building allowed it to be rehabilitated.

There is no original detail left on the interior of the high school as it was turned into the Helena Heights apartments for low income seniors in 2013. There are now 40 apartments, a library, gym, and community room.

SACRED HEART ACADEMY

This is the site of the Sacred Heart Academy. In the late 1800s there was an influx of Irish and Italian families to Arkansas. The first bishop of Arkansas, Right Rev. Andrew Byrne in Little Rock promoted the Catholic education of the immigrants by buying land for a convent and school in Helena.

He bought this property including the 1830 home of Colonel Henry Biscoe, a former state legislator and then he brought four Sisters of Mercy from Ireland to teach at a girl's school called St. Catherine's, which was installed in the Biscoe house. During the Civil War the numbers of Catholics declined in Helena and the state. The school was used as a hospital for Union and Confederate soldiers and the barn was used to treat slaves.

Because of the death of Bishop Byrne in 1862 and the impact of the war the sisters closed the school and convent in 1868 and they moved to Little Rock and Fort Smith.

In 1879 Bishop Edward Fitzgerald in Little Rock asked six Sisters of Charity from Kentucky to oversee a school in Helena for Catholic and non-Catholic girls. They took over the building that had housed St. Catherine's. This became Sacred Heart Academy and was considered one of the state's best schools for girls.

Improvements to the Academy included dormitories, classrooms and colonnades joining all the various buildings on the site.

In 1888 St. Mary's Catholic Church was built near Sacred Heart Academy. Between 1890 and 1905 the Catholic population grew because of the immigration of Italians from southern Italy and Sicily.

In 1917 the Sisters financed a new school building. The commercial Department at the school became the first business school in Helena and the enrollment grew in that year to 80 students. A kindergarten was added in 1920 and an Experimental Science Department was funded by the Knights of Columbus in 1922.

After World War II, enrollment declined dramatically and it closed in 1968 because of a lack of funds. The building was sold to the Helena Housing Authority and destroyed in 1973.

African American Catholics had separate facilities in Helena. At the turn of the century Father Eugene Phalen, Provincial of the Holy Ghost Fathers took on the project of establishing black Catholic churches throughout the south.

This movement funded the establishment of St. Cyprian's an African American Catholic church in Helena in 1928. In 1939 Bishop John B. Morris opened the St. Cyprian's Day School in the church building on Holly Street for African Americans, staffed by two sisters of Charity from Sacred Heart Academy. In the 1950s a lot of priests were leaving the church, which made it hard to find staff to run St. Cyprian's. The school closed in 1963 and was leased to Holly Street Head Start and the building is still on the site.

Parish Hall, built in 1939.

This building has been heavily altered. In 1955 Elvis Presley performed here but legend goes that he was asked to not come back after he supposedly autographed a girl's thigh.

St. Mary's Catholic Church

This is St. Mary's Catholic Church, which was listed on the National Register in 2007. The church was built in 1936 and it is an example of Late Gothic Revival architecture designed by Charles Eames.

Gothic Revival architecture emerged at the beginning of the 19th century and was very popular from 1830-1870. It was inspired by medieval architecture and was considered to be the appropriate style for churches, colleges and rural houses by Romanticists. It remained popular for churches through the 1940s.

What makes St. Mary's Gothic is the cross-shaped floor plan, windows with a restrained lancet arch, graduated lancet arched entry, truncated brick buttresses and the steeple of copper diamond shaped shingles and Gothic inspired louvers. The steeple is topped with a fleche that represents the sacred monogram of Christ, the

Chi Rho with the pendant Alpha and Omega. There is also a vertical emphasis in the gabled sections, tall, thin windows and the vertical form of the sculpture of the Madonna and Child by St. Louis artist Caroline Janis.

You see the symbols of the Holy Trinity also worked into the brick at the gable pediment.

Another Gothic influence is the tile mosaic above the front door, which displays a slightly Byzantine motif. And you'll see another example of Byzantine influenced art inside.

That being said, Charles Eames stated in the 1936 Guardian that the church didn't adhere to any particular style from the past but was instead a vital expression of modern life and worship. Other articles in the 1930s make note of its Contemporary form.

The intent of the architecture is emphasized by its functionality and simplicity, which was meant to inspire the parishioners to feel truth and sincerity – considered appropriate for entrance into a House of god.

This was only one of two churches in Arkansas that Charles Eames designed before he went on to become a well-known furniture designer. The other was in Paragould.

Charles Eames studied architecture in St. Louis in 1925 and went to work for the local firm of Trueblood and Graf. In 1934 he opened a new firm in St. Louis with Robert T. Walsh, who was his partner in the plans for St. Mary's.

AHPP historian Callie Williams will have an article in the Arkansas Historical Quarterly about Charles Eames and there are plans for a documentary on Eames as well.

The Catholic Church grew during the 19th century in Helena because of the immigration of Irish Americans. An 1856 frame Catholic Church was replaced in 1889 with a brick church. That was the church that stood on this site until 1934 when it was razed for the construction of the current building.

Father Thomas J. Martin moved to Helena from St. John's Seminary in Little Rock in 1925 and saw the need for a larger church because of the growing congregation.

Destruction of the 1889 church began in 1934 and the new building was dedicated in 1936.

We will be going inside and Donna Parker, who is a member of St. Mary's will tell us about the interior and Charles Eames' design.

Centennial Baptist Church

The Centennial Baptist Church was listed as a national Historic Landmark in 2003. It was recognized as such because of its association with Dr. Elias Camp Morris, who served as pastor from 1879 until his death in 1922. Morris came to Helena in 1877 working as a shoemaker and preaching on Sundays.

In 1879 he became the pastor of Centennial Baptist Church. Starting with 23 members the congregation grew to more than 1,000 during his tenure. Morris organized and served as the executive secretary for an African American Baptist district association, which offered classes in stewardship, Sunday school teaching and choir management for Phillips, Lee and Monroe counties.

Morris was elected secretary to the Arkansas Negro Baptist Convention in 1880 and became president in 1882. He held this position for 27 years.

He strongly believed that achievement and religious growth were tied to education. At the 1884 meeting of the convention, Arkansas Baptist College, one of the most significant institutions of higher learning for African Americans in Arkansas, was voted into existence.

The college trained African American ministers and teachers and Morris served as chairman of the board of trustees for 25 years.

In 1886 the Foreign Mission Convention of the United States was established and the American National Baptist Convention and the Baptist Education Convention were founded in 1886 and 1892, respectively. By 1886 all three organizations determined to meet as one under the National Baptist Convention, which served as the administrative arm of African American Baptist denominations. Elias Camp Morris served as president of the convention from 1895 to 1922.

The formation of the National Baptist Convention was primarily in response to the issue of whether African Americans should establish self-sufficient religious and

educational institutions free from white leadership. To this end, Morris advocated nationally to establish African Americans right to independent religious associations and for recognition of the convention.

Morris promoted and aided African American authors to provide publications for the African American Baptist audience. Previously white Baptist denominations furnished newsletters, Sunday school lessons and religious materials. The American Baptist Publication Society in Philadelphia, published religious materials by African American Baptists but they were pressured by southern Baptists to reject their work.

In response Morris established the *Baptist Vanguard* in 1882 for distribution of black religious literature throughout the nation. In 1896 Morris advocated for the establishment of a black Baptist publishing board. He was appointed to a printing committee as editor – in –chief to prepare and publish Sunday school literature.

Morris also served Arkansas's First Congressional District as a delegate to the Arkansas State Republican Convention in 1884, 1888 and 1904. For almost 40 years he served the Arkansas State Republican Convention. During that time Morris fought against the formation of what was termed a Lily-white Republican party that sought the removal of African American party members from leadership roles. He continued his fight into the 1920s, by representing the African American Republican committee from Arkansas, known as the Republican State Central Committee.

In 1908 Morris was appointed as an emissary to the Belgian Congo by President Theodore Roosevelt. His actions as emissary resulted in the removal of Belgian King Leopold II who was exploiting the country for his own enrichment.

Morris encouraged African American men to participate in the draft during WWI, in order to restore their full rights as citizens. During the Elaine race riot of 1919 Morris influenced local events that promoted peaceful resolution.

In 1900 he organized the Arkansas State Mission Board to promote cooperation between the National Baptist Convention and the white Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1903 he assisted in organizing the bi-racial General Convention of America and in 1905 aided the formation of the Baptist World Congress by serving as the only African American member on the two organizations' executive committees.

On the event of his death in 1922 the mayor of Helena declared that that all city businesses, African American and white be closed for the funeral.

Centennial Baptist was built in 1905 and it is known as the only known Church designed by an African American architect for an African American congregation.

The building is a late example of Gothic Revival. Typical Gothic features on this building are square entry towers, lancet windows, a prominent center gable, corbeling of the brick and buttresses.

In the years since Morris' death the church had begun to suffer from deterioration. The main issue was an overloaded roof that caused the interior trusses to squat, which bowed the sidewalls out of plumb. In the 1990s Reverend A.L. Woodson began the effort to raise funds for restoration. The Helping Hands of Centennial Committee raised money from public and private funds to begin work and in 1994 they obtained a Certified Local Government grant from the Department of Arkansas Heritage for a structural report.

In 1998 they received funds from the department for roof repair and structural repairs. The department also provided funds in 2003 for the application of steel trusses to hold up the east wall.

Currently a group is trying to get the National Park Service to take over the structure.

Fort Curtis

Mark Christ is going to give us information on Fort Curtis. This is a reconstruction, dedicated in 2012 and is the site of the Peabody School and the playing fields for Old Helena High School. It is not the actual location of the historic fort but it was just north of the current site.

Moore-Horner House

1859 Greek Revival and Italianate home.

Invite Debra Smith, Historic Sites Manager, to speak.