

History of the Eureka Springs Historic District

The Eureka Springs Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. It was one of the earliest districts in Arkansas. At that time the boundaries of the district were those of the city limits. According to federal rulings, Historic District boundaries set before 1980 may not be shrunk, so this remains the district of today. There are 967 properties within the district, of which 491 (51%) contribute to the historic significance. The majority of properties are residential, with 101 commercial buildings, five public buildings, twelve churches and fifteen recognized natural springs. The district contains 596 buildings constructed before 1955, of which 72% were built prior to 1910 – about 200 buildings constructed in the 1890s alone.

In the 1960s, 116 buildings were constructed to represent the second period of significant growth in the city based on a new wave of tourists seeking outdoor recreation activities on nearby Beaver Lake.

Eureka Springs is situated upon Sections 10 and 15, Township 20 north, Range 26 west, in the northwestern part of Carroll County, and upon the headwaters of Leatherwood Creek, a tributary of the White River. It is about nine miles from the Missouri border and has an average elevation of about 1400 feet above sea level. The town was named, and the first house built, on July 4, 1879. The town itself is built on approximately twenty hills, divided by 19 canyons and ravines, has 238 avenues and streets, with about 54 miles of rock retaining walls. It is estimated that about 60,000 cubic yards of limestone have been utilized in the walls and buildings of the town. The bulk of the town was built in an eight to ten year period in the 1890's.

The original commercial structures were built of wood, but a fire, on November 3, 1883, destroyed approximately five acres of the town and most of the business district. It was this fire that caused the emphasis to be placed on stone construction when the town was rebuilt. A great number of the cut stone and brick buildings which were constructed between 1883 and 1900 remain today in their original state.

It is extremely difficult to define the overall architectural style in the commercial section of Eureka Springs. It does, certainly, show strong elements of the Renaissance Period of American architecture (1880–1900). The influence of European architecture, as it was being interpreted at this time by such American architects as Richard Morriss Hunt, and Henry Hobson Morrison, is discernable. On the whole, however, the construction of commercial and public buildings in Eureka Springs, displays simplicity of style that was not characteristic of the exuberant, picturesque, but incoherent architecture which characterized the late 'eighties' and early 'nineties'.

Rough-faced stone, used alone and in conjunction with pressed brick, were the predominant materials; although there are some examples of the decorative use of cast iron, and even the use of sheet iron for cornices. The architecture is representative of the styles then in vogue in the East, but has lost something in the transposition and gained an indefinable flavor of its own.

The significance of Eureka Springs as an historic district lies in the fact that here, preserved virtually intact, is a unique health resort community representative of the latter part of the 19th century, with the added bonus of an extensive “roadside culture” from one of the National Auto Trails, U.S. 62, dating from the 1920s to 1960s.

The Spa, or 'watering place,' along with patent medicines, was a distinct part of the American Scene until the first quarter of the 20th Century, when, apparently, more sophisticated Americans began to doubt the efficacy of cures by either. Some of the watering places made the transition from the health spa to the vacation resort; usually with emphasis on horse racing or gambling to attract the wealthy. Old watering places, therefore, still exist in many parts of North America, but having been successful in making the transition from health resort to vacation resort, their success has been reflected in the modernization of their facilities. This means that the bulk of their buildings and structures of the Spa Period have been either razed or drastically remodeled. Downtown Eureka Springs, due to a series of circumstances, has been virtually frozen in the architectural period 1880–1910 for over three-quarters of a century.

Dr. Alvah Jackson was the discoverer of the springs; at least insofar as their medicinal qualities and subsequent reputation were concerned. Local tradition has it that the Indians had visited these springs in the years before the coming of the white man in order to take advantage of their curative powers. Therefore, when one of Dr. Jackson's sons became afflicted with a painful inflammation of the eyes, while on a hunting trip in the area in 1858, Dr. Jackson had him bathe his eyes in the Basin Spring. In the course of a few days there was a favorable change in his son's condition. Dr. Jackson was convinced that the spring water had curative powers. He bottled and sold the water as "Dr. Jackson's Eye Water." It acquired a wide reputation in Arkansas and adjoining states.

Legend also has it that during the Civil War, Dr. Jackson frequently treated the sick and wounded of both armies. His personal sympathies, however, lay with the South and in February of 1865 he attempted to nurse some Confederate soldiers back to health. As northwest Arkansas was then occupied by Federal troops it was necessary for these invalids to take refuge in the mountains, so they moved into the Eureka Springs area and camped on the bluff above what was later to be named Basin Spring. In a few months the soldiers were reported to have completely recovered. The medicine

qualities of the springs were not, however, to be exploited again until May of 1879. At this time Dr. Jackson induced Judge Saunders, of the County Court, who suffered from arysipelas, to attempt a cure at the springs. Judge Saunders followed Dr. Jackson's advice and within ten weeks he was, reputedly, cured.

Naturally, there is no way of determining if the spring waters had any therapeutic value at that time. Subsequent analysis of the waters have not disclosed any great chemical difference between the waters of these springs and those of others throughout the portion of the state. The eye ailment of Dr. Jackson's son may have been of such nature that it yielded simply to bathing in cold water. The cure of the Confederate soldiers may have been brought about by a combination of food and rest. Judge Sanders' cure comes in a suspicious proximity to the exploitation of the springs.

On July 4, 1879, Judge Saunders built the first house in Eureka Springs. It was more of a summer cabin, however, as Judge Saunders' residence continued to be at the county seat in Berryville. In the same month, O.D. Thornton built a rough board shanty and occupied it as a general store, He was able to do this as a market existed for his goods in the 150 or so invalids who had collected around Basin Spring and were living here in tents or wagons. By the end of July there were twelve structures around the springs, and by August 10, the population had reached 180. A week later it was to surge to 300. This increase in population was responsible for the building of another general store, a meat market and a blacksmith shop. Measures were also taken to have streets laid out and roads leading to the town maintained.

In 1880 the nearest railroad was at Pierce City, Missouri, fifty-five miles to the north. Visitors to Eureka Springs would arrive at Pierce City by train and travel to Eureka Springs by hack. The trip took nine hours. Ozark, Arkansas, eighty-five miles to the south, was also on a railroad and provided access to Eureka Springs, for travelers coming from the southeast and southwest. The journey

from Ozark took nineteen hours through some extremely rough mountain country.

From 1879 to 1885 there was constant litigation over the ownership of the land on which the city was situated. In 1885 the bulk of the claims of prior litigants were in the hands of the Eureka Improvement Company. Powell Clayton, former Union general, and former Governor of Arkansas during the Reconstruction Period, was the president. A compromise was made with the City of Eureka Springs in 1885 and Eureka Springs property owners were able to secure title to their property. All unoccupied property, however, was to remain in the possession of the Eureka Improvement Company. The Eureka Springs Railway was chartered on February 27, 1882. It was opened to travel on February 1, 1893. This railroad joined the Frisco Railroad at Seligman, Missouri, 18 1/2 miles away. Powell Clayton was also the president and manager of the Eureka Springs Railway.

In 1881 there were thirteen buildings which were called hotels. It is probable that most of these were of frame construction and that the majority were little more than boarding houses. The Crescent Hotel, which was constructed and operated by the Eureka Improvement Company, was first opened to the public on May 10, 1886; construction having begun in 1884.

In 1905, in what was apparently the last echo of the Eureka Springs boom, the Basin Park Hotel was opened. This building represented an unusual form of architecture since each of the seven floors could be reached without riding an elevator or climbing stairs. The position of the building against a mountainside made every floor a ground floor.

It is difficult, at this time, to determine the causes which were responsible for the decline in the economy of Eureka Springs. It

apparently weathered the financial panic of 1893, and if the construction of the Basin Park Hotel is any indication, it was not affected by the 'Rich Man's Panic of 1904.' In 1907, however, there were a rash of bank failures in the United States and these may have affected some of the sources of Eureka Springs' financing. Other factors which may have influenced the decline of Eureka Springs might have been the publicity and public awareness of Pure Food and Drug legislative activity under the administration of Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1908) which resulted in a General Federal Food Law being enacted in 1906. Another thing which may have contributed to Eureka Springs' loss of patronage was the legalizing of horse racing in Arkansas and the establishment of Oaklawn Racetrack at Hot Springs in 1905.

Whatever the causes, the health spa phase was ending for Eureka Springs. In 1908, the luxurious Crescent Hotel became the Crescent College for Girls. In 1911, the railroad repair shops located here were discontinued. Apparently not much new construction was undertaken after 1905. By the same token, however, other than the dismantling of some of the wooden residences, there was no razing of existing stone and brick buildings. Due to the quality of this brick and masonry construction there was but little deterioration, even in structures which were to remain unoccupied over a long period of time. Downtown, in the 1920s, the main streets were paved in concrete and The Auditorium opened in 1929 to the sound of the John Phillip Sousa Band.

Although the economy of Eureka Springs suffered a loss of visitors after the federal government began regulating medicines, the opening of the National Auto Trails in the 1920s brought in a new type of visitor – the motorist. U.S. Highway 62, which ran along the edge of town was one of these trails -- beginning in Niagara Falls, NY and ending in El Paso, TX. The highway in our area was known as The Ozark Trail, with the area west of town known as The Ozark Skyway. A roadside culture of filling stations, motor camps/courts/motels, cafes, and gift shops located on or just off Route 62, extended Eureka Springs' expertise in hospitality to a

new group of travelers. Much of this architecture still remains to bear witness to that era extending until the 1970s.

Eureka Springs marked time during the years of the First World War, through the post-war period and into the Depression of the late 1920's and 1930's. It is doubtful if Eureka Springs suffered too much during the Depression for it had become accustomed to short rations during the twenty years past. One casualty, however, was the Crescent College for Girls, which had to close its doors in 1933. It was during this time that big city artists and writers relocated here, at least seasonally, to begin the art/culture scene which continues today. A WPA project created the world's largest hand cut stone dam at Lake Leatherwood, as well as bath house, picnic shelter and recreation area. This 1600 acre city park is again becoming a recreation hub with a variety of activities including mountain biking, hiking, camping, ball fields, fishing swimming and croquet.

World War II brought neither boom nor bust to the community, and it continued to exist on about the same level as it had for the past thirty years or more. The close of the war, however, saw a slight improvement in the fortunes of the community. With wartime travel restrictions lifted, more Americans were touring the country, taking advantage of new automobiles and unrationed gasoline. Many people began to discover this unique, old-fashioned town and to visit it; not as a health resort but as a pleasant anachronism. The increase in tourism was enough to infuse some new life into the local economy, but not enough, initially, to warrant any new construction. It did, however, lead to the reopening and use of existing facilities.

During the late 1950's and early 1960's the construction of Beaver Dam and the intended use of the impounded lake as a recreation facility, along with the opening of the Pea Ridge Battle Field National Military Park, brought new visitors to northwest Arkansas. Eureka Springs benefited, and more motels and service facilities

were created along US Highway 62. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, more and more travelers began to stop for the purpose of visiting this town with its turn-of-the-century atmosphere, and with its houses and streets clinging to the hillsides. Artists, writers and retiree's began to take permanent residence here and some of the out-of-state visitors began to purchase and refurbish old homes, or even to build new ones. Thus, Eureka Springs began to experience a second "boom" after a lapse of over fifty years.

Today, the buildings and structures in downtown Eureka Springs, and the adjacent residential area, are almost all of the 1880-1910 period. The increase in tourism, and, the attraction of new residents, has resulted in the old commercial buildings being reopened for use. There has also been a corresponding activity in the restoration of private residences. This increase in both business activity and population made it increasingly evident to city officials and private citizens that the new growth might result in the destruction of the very architectural atmosphere that made that growth possible.

The desire to preserve the turn-of-the-century buildings, and the atmosphere which contributes so greatly to this unique community, led to the creation of the Eureka Springs Planning Commission. This commission made certain zoning recommendations that designated certain areas within the town as either Historic Commercial or Historic Residential. At the same time they prepared ordinances that would ensure that renovation or new construction would not be detrimental to the architectural atmosphere of Eureka Springs. These recommendations passed into law on January 15, 1970, shortly after Eureka Springs was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The City of Eureka Springs applied to the National Park Service for an upgrade to National Significance on the National Register in June 2005. Eureka Springs was also named one of America's Twelve Distinctive Destinations in 2001 by the National Trust for Historic

Preservation, and a Preserve America Community in 2005. Restoration of the city's 1928 Auditorium was completed with a prestigious Save America's Treasures grant in 2004. In addition to the Historic District, the City has individual National Register listings for Black Bass Dam and the structures at Lake Leatherwood City Park. Just outside of town is Thorncrown Chapel, built in 1990 and already listed on the National Register. It was named the #7 "Most Important Building of the Twentieth Century." Eureka Springs has also worked hard to preserve the natural beauty within the city limits and is Arkansas' oldest Tree City USA, with 25 years of protecting the urban forests.

The City of Eureka Springs enacted legislation to enable the formation of a Historic District Commission to oversee the protection of the town's historical assets. The HDC was formed in 1978 and continues today with a commission of seven volunteers appointed by the Mayor and approved by the City Council. Eureka Springs is also an Arkansas Certified Local Government receiving technical assistance, staff training and grant funding from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. The commission is also a member of the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Providing design review to the Eureka Springs Historic District continues to be a challenge for the Commission. Thirty-five years after the National Register Listing, some of the neighborhoods within their oversight that were brand new or did not even exist when the town was first listed are quickly approaching the 50 year status of "historic." Preserving the recent past as well as the Victorian era is a challenge the commissioners are already facing. However, the history of Eureka Springs did not end in 1910 and all eras of the past deserve equal protection for the generations of the future. And that will be the on-going work of the Eureka Springs Historic District Commission.

