Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas announces the 2009 list of Arkansas’s endangered historic places

Six to Save
The Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas began Arkansas’s Most Endangered Places program in 1999 to raise awareness of the importance of Arkansas’s historic properties and the dangers they face through neglect, encroaching development, and loss of integrity. The list is updated each year and serves to generate discussion and support for saving the state’s endangered historic places. Previous places listed include the Bluff Shelter Archaeological Sites in Northwest Arkansas, the Goddard Hotel in Hot Springs, the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess, Centennial Baptist Church in Helena, the Stephen H. Chism House in Booneville, the twentieth century African-American Rosenwald Schools throughout the state, the Mountaineer Apartments in Hot Springs, Forest Fire Lookouts statewide, the Historic Dunbar Neighborhood in Little Rock, Carleson Terrace in Fayetteville, the Berger-Graham House in Jonesboro.

Properties are nominated by individuals, communities, and organizations interested in preserving these places for future Arkansans. Criteria for inclusion in the list includes a property’s listing or eligibility for listing in the Arkansas or National Register of Historic Places; the degree of a property’s local, state or national significance; and the imminence and degree of the threat to the property.

The Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas was founded in 1981 and is the only statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Arkansas’s architectural and cultural heritage. The mission of the Alliance is to educate, advocate, and assist historic preservation in Arkansas.
Six to Save | 2009 List

Bell-Robinson-Triplett Mansion
  Pine Bluff
  —
  Central Business District
    Little Rock
  —
  Dr. E.P. McGhee Infirmary
    Chicot County
  —
  Faulkner County Courthouse
    Conway
  —
  Old First Baptist Church
    Arkadelphia
  —
  Pleasant Grove School House
    (Possum Trot Church)
    Carroll County
The Bell-Robinson-Triplett Mansion was built in 1852 in the Federal style and was a wedding gift from Judge Samuel Calhoun Roane to his daughter who married Marcus Lafayette Bell on December 19, 1852. The house was Pine Bluff's first brick mansion and was central to the social life in Pine Bluff before and after the Civil War.

During the Battle of Pine Bluff in October 1863 a cannonball fired from the Union defense near the courthouse went through a second story window and rolled across the floor. The cannonball compromised the structure and a metal rod was later installed in the attic to stabilize the building. After the battle, the victorious Union troops looked to the Bell Mansion as a place to establish headquarters. According to local history, the troops were spurned by the lady of the house who wrapped a servant child in bandages and informed the men they were welcome to come in if they were not afraid of smallpox.

In the 1920s, the Mansion was owned by the Robinson Family proprietors of one of Pine Bluff’s oldest businesses: Robinson Funeral Home, which was established in 1894. In the 1960s the mansion was where Pine Bluff girls attended etiquette classes, taught by Vashti Triplett.

In March of 2009 a fire broke out in the vacant mansion, heavily damaging the house. According to the nomination, The exterior and interior walls are all intact and still standing. Two downstairs parlors and the dining room are intact and were not affected by the fire. Other parts of the house are still intact but cannot be accessed at this time.

By placing the Bell Mansion on the Six to Save list, the Alliance hopes to highlight threat faced by historic buildings throughout Arkansas. The hope is that the Bell-Robinson-Triplett Mansion can be rehabilitated so that it can serve to demonstrate the history and heritage of the city of Pine Bluff and the state of Arkansas.
Little Rock’s Central Business District hosts the Main Street not just of the Capital City, but of the state of Arkansas. Little Rock’s historic commercial core is home to the Pulaski County government, the municipal government, state and federal offices, and many private businesses. While preservation of historic buildings has been a successful component of recent revitalization efforts in parts of downtown, such as the River Market district and the adjacent residential MacArthur Park neighborhood, preservation in most areas of downtown has been piecemeal or non-existent. Many buildings in the historic core are underutilized, have sat vacant for years, or have been lost: replaced by parking decks, surface parking or empty lots.

In recent months, public attention has been drawn to Main Street, north of Interstate 630 with news of demolitions. The recent demolition of the entire west side of the street between Capitol Avenue and Fourth Street and the prospect of the historic buildings’ replacement by an office building with a parking deck at ground level leaves not just a large blank space, but also raises the question of how new development will contribute to the vitality of the thoroughfare. On the east side of the street, demolition work has begun on the Center Theater, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in the 1990s was the subject of plans to complete a rehabilitation.

A little further south, former bank and department store buildings on the west side of the 500 block, owned since 2005 by out of town developers are the subject of plans to redevelop the adjacent buildings into a mixed use development (retail and condominiums). However, no rehabilitation work has been done to date, and the buildings continue to sit vacant.

The future of another residential development is uncertain in the National-Register listed Wallace and Archer Buildings at Main Street and Markham Street many years after their rehabilitation into Block 2 Lofts. The buildings, which sit on valuable land directly across Markham Street from the Statehouse Convention Center, are for sale. There has been much discussion about adding more parking for the convention center.

The threats to historic buildings seem to be concentrated on Main Street, but historic structures are in danger nearby, as well. Two significant buildings, the 1928 Spanish Revival Little Rock YMCA building at Broadway and 6th Street and the last remaining freestanding house in a sea of parking lots, a Charles Thompson-designed house leased for many years as office space, stand vacant. The remnants of the residential areas at the western end of downtown, toward the State Capitol are increasingly rare.

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Central Business District, continued
Little Rock, Pulaski County

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Rehabilitation work on the house at the northeast corner of 3rd and Pulaski Streets has stalled, leaving the house stripped of its siding and exposed to the elements. The house is even within the Capitol Zoning district, but the state commission which oversees the district cannot compel a property owner to maintain his or her building. This too demonstrates the need to be proactive in addressing preservation of historic buildings.

No single factor makes historic structures in central downtown Little Rock vulnerable. Much of the area is not encompassed by any local-ordinance historic or design overlay district which would guide re-development or deter unnecessary demolition. Erosion of historic character does not need bad intentions in order to happen. A little carelessness, a few years’ delay, a run of bad luck in the real estate markets, regulations that limit development—all these can and do take their toll.

The Central Business District of Little Rock has become disjointed with the existence of vacant buildings and parking areas. The cases cited here reflect the haphazard approach to redevelopment along Main Street and throughout downtown and demonstrate the desperate need for a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the downtown core of Little Rock including policies that address:

- preservation and reuse of historic buildings as a strong component in redevelopment efforts of historic areas of Little Rock, not just in downtown, but throughout the city
- development of a demolition review policy to allow for review of applications for demolition permits for a specific period of time to assess a building’s historical significance
- development of policy to make more transparent the planning process for public places in the city and to seek public input for major development plans

The Alliance hopes that by listing Little Rock’s Central Business District to the 2009 Six to Save list, the City of Little Rock will be encouraged to develop policies that include preserving our heritage as a key component in overall city- and state-wide economic and community development.
The Dr. E.P. McGhee Infirmary was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in June of 2005 for its association with the life of Dr. E. P. McGhee, as well as a significant reminder of medical practices in the early part of the twentieth century. The infirmary became one of the leading medical institutions in the state because of his hard work. Dr. McGhee made surgery his specialty and reportedly in the first sixteen years performed 3,600 major operations. The infirmary became known as the "Mayo Clinic of the South" because he installed air-conditioning and kept abreast of new surgical techniques. The X-ray lab he had installed was one of the first in the state of Arkansas. The Dr. McGhee Infirmary served as a hospital from 1910 until the new Lake Village Hospital opened in 1967. The north end of the building continued to serve as a clinic until 1973.

The infirmary building is currently used as the Museum of Chicot County Arkansas (MOCCA). The museum displays and interprets medical equipment from Dr. McGhee’s practice and other materials that illustrate the history of Chicot County. MOCCA’s close proximity to the recently restored Lakeport Plantation positions the Dr. E.P. McGhee Infirmary well as a significant historic property for attracting heritage tourists and spur economic development in the Arkansas Delta.

Assessment by architects identified the need for extensive roof repairs, foundation repairs, and interior renovations to maintain use of the building. Limited funding through the county makes it more and more difficult for the museum to obtain resources for repairs, without which the building and artifacts are threatened.

We hope that listing this site on the Six to Save list will draw attention to the needs of the Museum of Chicot County Arkansas and generate support and adequate funding for repairs to the Dr. McGhee Infirmary.
The site of the courthouse was donated to Faulkner County in 1873 by Asa P. Robinson, surveyor, local entrepreneur and the man who is considered to be the father of the city of Conway. At the formation of the county, Mr. Robinson donated the property on which the county buildings sit today with the stipulation that it be fenced and that no trees be cut from the property. When the first courthouse burned down in 1893 it was replaced by another on the same site. This building was constructed by George W. Donaghey. The Donaghey courthouse was torn down and replaced in 1935 with today’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded structure built by Little Rock architectural firm, Wittenburg and Deloney. This courthouse was designed to hold the county offices and a jail on the top (third) floor.

In 1995, the Faulkner County Courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural style, noted to be the finest example in the county of this unusual combination of the Colonial Revival and Art Deco styles and for its historic significance as local landmark and one of the oldest public buildings in Conway and in Faulkner County.

In the summer of 2008, the County government began to assess the need for repairs to the building, citing lack of space and outdated building systems. One evaluation of renovations concluded that the cost of rehabilitation would be more expensive than building a new courthouse, sparking discussion among County officials and in the local media about demolishing the courthouse. The Faulkner County Quorum Court pursued revocation of the conservation easement that was donated to the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program by the county upon receipt of a County Courthouse grant in the mid 1990s. The future plans of the Faulkner County government are still undecided and without an easement in place to protect the building, the concern is that the courthouse may be lost.

In response to the threat to the courthouse, local citizens have formed a group called the Coalition for the Historic Courthouse Cultural Center. The group’s mission is to explore the possibilities of adapting the historic courthouse to serve as a community center, to encourage preservation of the Faulkner County Courthouse so that it may remain in use as a public building.

Unfortunately, the Faulkner County Courthouse situation is not uncommon. Historic County Courthouses across the state face a variety of stability and maintenance issues. These iconic buildings are symbolic of the rich histories of our counties and they deserve adequate attention and resources to ensure their survival.

The Alliance hopes that the Six to Save listing will encourage the Faulkner County government and local citizens who want to see the courthouse remain in public use, to work together to find a solution, but also we hope that the listing of the Faulkner County Courthouse will inspire other county governments to recognize the value of their own historic courthouses.
In July of 1884, First Baptist Church dedicated a new building on the corner of 7th and Caddo Streets in Arkadelphia. An article appearing in the Southern Standard on July 5th, 1884, described the building as “a church edifice that could do credit to any association of Christians.” After it was dedicated, the building changed hands several times before 1940, when the church was sold to the Deaton family who converted the building to a dry cleaning business, which was operated until 1980.

Since that time, the church has fallen into severe disrepair. In 2007, with the city of Arkadelphia threatening condemnation, the church was purchased by buyers who planned to rehabilitate the building. The new owners cleaned the property and installed a new roof to stabilize the church.

An assessment of the condition of the building was performed in early 2009 by a preservation architect, who found the building to be structurally sound. Still, years of sitting vacant and unsympathetic renovations have taken their toll on the church. The building will require extensive work for a complete rehabilitation.

The hope of involved community members is to raise funds to acquire the church and rehabilitate the building for use as a community arts center, making it an asset to the City of Arkadelphia once again. The Six to Save listing is intended to help the Arkadelphia arts group attract support and funding for the purchase and rehabilitation for the old First Baptist Church.
The Pleasant Grove School House (commonly known as the Possum Trot Church) sits in a remote part of Carroll County on an unpaved county road that meanders through the community of Possum Trot. Adjacent to the building is a branch of Possum Trot Creek. The property was given to the community for the price of one dollar between 1900 and 1905 so that a school could be built.

Historically, the building served as the focal point of the Possum Trot Community. The building was used for school and church services, family reunions and gospel singings. The church was not affiliated with any denomination, but according to community members, was conservative in its traditions: women and men sat on opposite sides of the church. The building has been used continuously for multiple purposes. Today, the building is occasionally used for community church services. The Pleasant Grove School House is the only remaining building in the Possum Trot Community.

The school house needs a new roof to prevent water intrusion and deterioration of the interior. The building’s interior walls and ceiling have sustained some water damage and the building’s wood siding needs to be painted to maintain the exterior of the building. Community members, including descendants of original deed holders of the property, are working to raise money to re-roof the building and to perform needed repairs to the interior and exterior. The goal of the stakeholders is to stabilize the community building so that it may continue to serve as an exhibit of the community’s built heritage and as a resource for residents of the Possum Trot area.

The Possum Trot Church is illustrative of the issues faced by rural vernacular architecture across the state. The Alliance hopes that including the Pleasant Grove School House on its Six to Save listing will highlight the importance Arkansas’s rural heritage and generate support for preservation and continued use of the building.
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Notes