



Phillips County Courthouse c1914
600 Cherry Street, Helena, Arkansas

Phillips County History

Phillips County is part of the Delta region of Arkansas located where the St. Francis River empties into the Mississippi River and has significant touches on nearly every aspect of the state's history. Phillips County's soil consists of alluvial deposits from the Mississippi River, making it prime agricultural land. The southern edge of Crowley's Ridge provides higher land once used by Native Americans. Helena's location on the Mississippi River gave it the potential to be an important transportation hub, although it eventually was overtaken in importance by Memphis, Tennessee.

Established on the banks of the Mississippi River in 1820, Phillips County is the second oldest county in Arkansas. The land had a rich history that was scattered with images of ancient Indian cultures, famous explorers like Desoto, who explored Arkansas entering just south of Helena in 1541, Lewis and Clark, and Frenchmen like Marquette and Jolliet, LaSalle and DeTonti, who colonized what became the Louisiana Territory.

President Thomas Jefferson commissioned Prospect Robbins and Joseph Brown to survey the southern part of the Louisiana Purchase. Robbins and Brown placed a marker in the northwest corner of Phillips County on November 10, 1815. This marker is the beginning point from which all Louisiana Purchase lands were surveyed.

This vast land purchase from Napoleon in 1803 provided a new real estate opportunity for entrepreneurs like Sylvannus Phillips. Phillips purchased huge tracts of land that bordered the Mississippi River along the Arkansas Territory in 1797. On May 1, 1820 the territorial county of Phillips, which was named after Sylvannus Phillips, was created and encompassed most of eastern Arkansas. Later, eleven counties were formed in part or completely from the original territorial county of Phillips. Sylvannus Phillips named a small village after his daughter, Helena, and it was made the county seat.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

Pre-European Exploration

Because of its location, the area was well populated long before European explorers arrived. The Hopewell culture of the Woodland period (600 BC-AD 1000) is represented by a variety of artifacts found in the county. These remains show the influence both of tribes of the northern Mississippi River and Ohio River valleys and of the Marksville culture of the lower Mississippi and Red River valleys, indicating that the area was a crossroads and a meeting place of North American cultures. Most spectacular, though, are the mounds at the Helena Crossing site. Located at the southern tip of Crowley's Ridge, they held the remains and personal possessions of several people interred about 2,000 years ago in elaborate log-lined tombs. In the twentieth century, the construction of highways and buildings destroyed much of the area's archaeological treasures. Spear points and other artifacts have been found in most parts of the county.



European Exploration and Settlement

French and Spanish explorers traveling the Mississippi River undoubtedly saw Phillips County and even landed on its shores, but they did not remark on it or influence it. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, though, settlers from the eastern United States had arrived in what would become Phillips County. Sylvannus Phillips, for whom the county was named, was living there by 1797, having come from North Carolina. Daniel Mooney and William Patterson arrived about the same time. Patterson's son John Patterson, born around 1800, was the first child not of Indian parents born in Phillips County.

Louisiana Purchase through Early Statehood



Louisiana Purchase State Park

The Arkansas territorial legislature established Phillips County out of Arkansas County on May 1, 1820, naming it for the early settler, who also was a member of the first territorial legislature. The county was laid out and surveyed by Nicholas Rightor the following year. Helena's was considered a viable location as a water transportation hub. The city of Helena, incorporated on November 16, 1833, grew up in that location; it was named for the daughter of Sylvannus Phillips. Among its first buildings was a two-story log structure that featured the county courthouse on the upper floor and the county jail on the lower. Phillips County was reduced in size twice: first when Monroe County was established in 1829, and later when Lee County was established in 1873.

The first school in Phillips County opened on April 25, 1836, on North Ohio Street in Helena and was operated by John Hornor. Many other schools and academies opened in Helena and in other parts of the county in following years, but few lasted more than a

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

year or two. The leaders of Helena hoped to see their city included in the first railroad lines built in Arkansas, but instead the railroad developed between Memphis and Little Rock (Pulaski County).

In addition to transportation, agriculture and lumber were the early industries of the county. The first sawmill was built in 1826. Like most Delta counties, Phillips County was a cotton-producing area, containing large plantations with many African-American slaves. In the 1840 census, only 905 of the 3,547 people living in Phillips County were slaves; but by 1860, 8,941 of the 14,877 residents were slaves. Snow Lake, one plantation settlement in the south part of the county, included fourteen homesteads sheltered by the Laconia Circle levee, said to be the first levee built on the west bank of the Mississippi River. Constructed piecemeal by workers for the various property owners, it encircled eighteen square miles of prime farmland built up from centuries of river flooding.

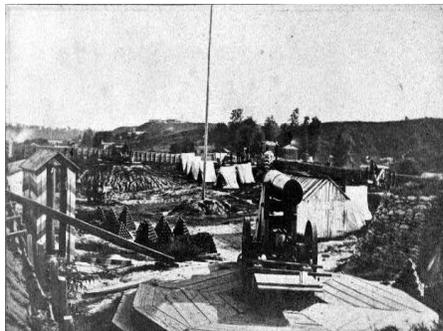


Cypress Logging

Civil War through Reconstruction

At the beginning of the Civil War, many of the men of Phillips County volunteered to fight on behalf of the Confederacy, providing enough companies to fill three regiments. The most famous company was the Yell Rifles, led by Patrick Cleburne, a native of Ireland who had lived in Helena since 1850.

Federal forces occupied Helena in July 1862. Strategists on both sides understood the



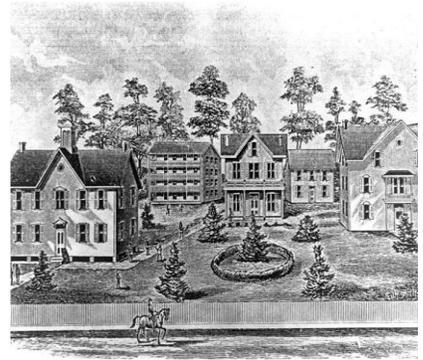
Original Ft. Curtis

importance of this river port, located between Memphis and Vicksburg, Mississippi. On July 4, 1863, Confederate forces led by Lieutenant General Theophilus H. Holmes attacked the Union position in Helena from several directions but were unable to dislodge the opposition. Over 1,600 Confederate casualties were reported in the battle, compared to 239 Union losses. That same day, Confederate forces in Vicksburg surrendered to Union forces led by General Ulysses S. Grant.

Another significant conflict occurred in Phillips County about a year after the Battle of Helena. In the Action at Wallace's Ferry on July 26, 1864, two Union forces were ambushed by cavalrymen from Arkansas and Missouri while crossing Big Creek. Nineteen Union soldiers and at least seven Confederate soldiers died in the action, which did not significantly alter the course of the war.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

That same year, Quaker missionaries Alida and Calvin Clark arrived in Helena to operate an orphanage for lost and abandoned black children. Two years later, the orphanage was moved to a rural site nine miles northwest of Helena. Their institution became Southland College, the first institution of higher education for former slaves west of the Mississippi River. The college operated until 1925, and many of its graduates became teachers throughout Arkansas.



Southland College c1895

Many of the newly freed slaves became tenant farmers and sharecroppers, but new workers were also brought in from other parts of the world. Beginning in 1870, Phillips County received dozens of Chinese laborers who signed five-year contracts to work for seven dollars a month and a garden spot to tend for themselves. Few of these workers completed their contracts, and none remained longer than five years.

Post Reconstruction through the Gilded Age

Like much of the state, Phillips County was shaped by the growth of railroads. In 1875, the Arkansas Midland Railroad was built west from Helena, fulfilling plans that dated back to the 1850s. New cities were established along the railroad lines, including Marvell, where the Dade & Embry store opened in 1873, while the city itself was incorporated on October 19, 1876. Several new lumber companies arose as a result of the railroads, which made transporting wood and wood products far easier.

The city of Elaine was also established, although it was not incorporated until the next century. Located on the Missouri Pacific (MoPac) line south of Helena, Elaine was named either for a famous actress of the time, the daughter of the developer, or a character in a poem by Tennyson. The first newspapers in Phillips County began to be published about this time: the *Helena Weekly World* began in 1870, and the same publisher began the *Helena Daily World* the following year.

Early Twentieth Century



Until the railroads, Helena had seen itself as a river port. Now the western part of the city was rapidly growing, with many new industries supported by rail traffic. West Helena was incorporated on May 23, 1917. Hardwood products continued to be a major part of Phillips County's industry. Factories created wagons, automobile parts, furniture, and building products from locally harvested hardwood. During the years 1920 to 1927, Helena was second only to Memphis in the United States for its production of hardwood products. A Chrysler plant was built in Helena in 1922 and continued to manufacture cars until 1956. World War I created a new market for wood products, as rifle stocks and other war materiel were sent abroad from Phillips County.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

Tension in agriculture also emerged in Phillips County. tenant farmers erupted into violence in Elaine the night of September 30, 1919. The Elaine Massacre caused the deaths of hundreds of black citizens (as well as five white men) and the arrests of nearly 300 more. The riot began during an African-American sharecroppers meeting at Hoop Spur Church to discuss joining the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America to campaign for better wages and working conditions for tenant farmers. Though accounts of who fired the first shots conflict, a shootout in front of the church on the night of September 30, 1919 between armed black guards around the church and three individuals whose vehicle was parked in front of the church resulted in the death of one white man, and the wounding of Phillips County's white deputy sheriff.



Arkansas Governor Charles Brough addressing crowd after the Elaine Massacre

What ensued has been called one of the earliest events in the American Civil Rights movement. Mob-violence threatened and tensions rose quickly. Although the exact number is unknown, estimates of the number of African Americans killed by whites range into the hundreds. Five white people lost their lives. The first twelve (of an estimated 265 arrested and detained) black men given trials had been convicted of murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. The "Elaine Twelve," as they would become known, contested the convictions with the help of Arkansas' leading African-American attorney, Scipio A. Jones. Six of the twelve were eventually freed by the Arkansas Supreme Court, and the remaining six defendants were granted a new hearing and were eventually relieved of the associated sentences.



Stranded on the roof 5 miles SW of Wabash during the 1927 flood

Major floods in 1927 and 1937 devastated the farms and the cities of Phillips County. Levees that had been rebuilt and improved after earlier floods were unable to handle the water those years. During the flood of 1927, the Laconia Circle levee at Snow Lake broke in six places, leaving the unprotected farms under sixteen feet of water. The flood was also a setback to the lumber industry from which it did not recover. Will Rogers included Helena in his tour of Arkansas, visiting the city on February 12, 1931, and raising \$1,500 from his appearance, money that was divided among various unemployment committees.

Thousands of 1937 flood refugees from Helena and the surrounding area received assistance from the Red Cross. Between the floods, the area languished through drought and the Great Depression.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

World War II through the Faubus Era

World War II created a shortage of labor in the county. The federal government responded by creating prisoner-of-war work camps in Phillips County and other parts of Arkansas. The West Helena work camp was built on the Phillips County fairgrounds at a cost of \$5,625 and opened on September 10, 1942. It housed Italian and later German prisoners of war.

On November 21, 1941, KFFA began broadcasting a program called King Biscuit Time. This program featured local blues performers and was seminal in establishing the sound of American music in the twentieth century. Major blues artists who began their careers in Phillips County include Robert Lockwood Junior, Robert Lee McCollum, Roosevelt Sykes, and Sonny Boy Williams. King Biscuit Time still broadcast daily and is the longest-running daily American radio broadcast in history.



Shown here in 1942 are (left to right) Joe Willie Wilkins, Dudlow Taylor, Sonny Boy Williamson, announcer Herb Langston, James "Peck" Curtis, and Willie Love.

After the war ended, agriculture again changed in Phillips County as Mexican migrant workers were brought into the fields. Meanwhile, the national demand for cotton was greatly reduced because of the development of synthetic fabrics, and soybeans replaced cotton in many of the fields.

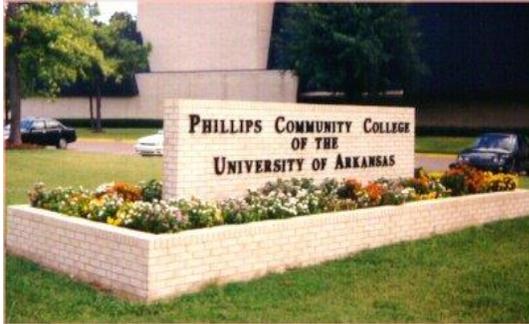
Helena and West Helena consolidated their school systems, building a new high school in 1946. Meanwhile, schools in Phillips County remained segregated even after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision of 1954 and the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock in 1957. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) targeted Phillips County, along with St. Francis and Lincoln counties, for voter registration drives and integration of lunch counters, libraries, and other facilities. SNCC also encouraged parents to enroll their children in schools that had previously only taught white students. Federal and state laws that had been changed from "separate but equal" facilities to "freedom of choice" facilities still resulted in de facto segregation since parents felt pressured to "choose" segregated schools. African Americans ran for school board positions in 1965 in Phillips County; when white candidates won those elections, SNCC leaders called for investigations. Although changes were not immediate, by 1967, as SNCC withdrew from activities in Arkansas, citizens were beginning to accept the end of the Jim Crow era.

Modern Era

The Delta region has been dealing with poverty for many years, and Phillips County is no exception. The 1990 U.S. Census ranked Phillips County as one of the sixteen poorest counties in the United States. Efforts to provide more paying jobs in the county have included development of agricultural products, such as the production of ethanol. More attention is also being given to tourism. Phillips County includes portions of the St. Francis National Forest and the White River National Wildlife Refuge. Hiking,

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

boating, and fishing are among the recreational opportunities in the county. In addition, the Delta Cultural Center opened in Helena in 1990. This museum, which includes several buildings, displays the history of the area, its architecture, and especially its musical heritage.



Phillips County Community College began holding classes in September 1966 after Act 560 of the state legislature and a county-wide referendum affirming the school, both in 1965, made the college possible. A second county-wide referendum in 1996 guaranteed financial support for the school, at which time its name was shortened to Phillips Community College. That same year, it became part of the University of Arkansas (UA) System. Its

original enrollment of 250 students has increased to more than 2,400, and new programs have been added regularly.

Probably the most important change in the county in recent years was the consolidation of Helena and West Helena into a single city, officially named Helena-West Helena. Merging the two communities had been discussed ever since the consolidation of their school districts in 1946, but the vote making consolidation official took place in March 2005.

Famous Residents

Phillips County is known as the home of two famous Civil War leaders, Patrick Cleburne and Thomas Hindman. In the twentieth century, the county produced several prominent musicians, including Robert Lockwood Junior, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Conway Twitty. Phillips County has also been home to leading politicians, including U.S. senator Blanche Lambert Lincoln and John Stroger, the first black president of the Cook County Board in Illinois.



**Unveiling General Cleburne
Helena Museum
623 Pecan Street, Helena, Arkansas**

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE IN PHILLIPS COUNTY

The history of the Arkansas Delta is rich with the heritage of the African-American families and communities that have populated the land for the past two centuries. The music, agricultural, Civil War, Civil Rights, and culinary heritage of the region carry the bold stamp of African Americans.

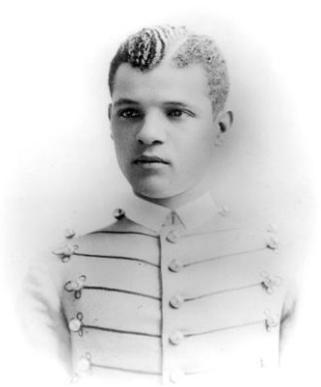
Many of the traditions of African Americans in the Arkansas Delta are not cataloged in museums. These traditions are carried through the music heard in churches and juke

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

joints; the stories told on front porches and at family reunions; and the sense of interconnectedness and shared experiences of black families and communities in the Delta.

We invite you to join us on a journey into the African-American heritage flowing through the Arkansas Delta. Explore the music, stories, cuisine and land which define a people and their cumulative experiences. In many ways, it is this shared heritage that forms the soul of the black population in the Delta, and it is tied forever to the alluvial soil that is the lifeblood of this rich region.

Because so much of the African-American history and heritage in the Arkansas Delta is not tied directly to the built environment, get ready for a sensory experience: hear the music –gospel, jazz, blues; see the land and fields which brought slavery to the region and enabled the suppression of African Americans into present times; smell and taste the sweetbreads, greens, barbeque and fried chicken –there is nothing better!



John Hanks Alexander was the second African-American graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point

**Centennial Baptist Church
York and Columbia Streets, Helena-West Helena
(Under restoration - Not open to the public)**



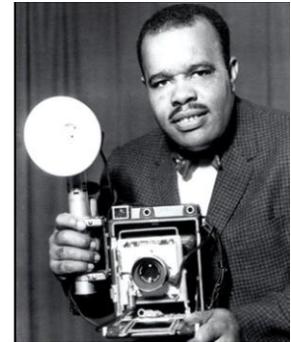
Centennial Baptist Church is nationally significant through its association with Dr. Elias Camp Morris, who served as pastor from 1879 until his death in 1922. The 1905 Gothic Revival church was designed by a member of Morris's congregation, Henry James Price, a trained African-American architect, to replace an earlier building that the membership had outgrown. The brick structure was designed to seat 1,000 and became an instant landmark in the community. Dr. E. C. Morris is recognized for his efforts on the national level to further the religious, political, and social achievements of African

Americans, and he served as president (1895-1922) of the National Baptist Convention, the largest African-American organization in the United States at the end of the 19th century. Centennial Baptist Church remains a symbol of those efforts in the heyday of Jim Crow in the American South. The building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is designated a National Historic Landmark.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

Rogerline Johnson Photography Studio
401 Columbia Street, Helena-West Helena
870.338.3012

Rogerline Johnson, a well-known African-American photographer and entrepreneur, worked in Helena and the surrounding Arkansas Delta during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras. Johnson was an integral part of Helena's civic, economic, cultural and political life. His interest in the community is reflected in his photographs of local people engaged in social, religious and educational events. His archives contain 25,000 black and white negatives taken between 1952 and 1971 that offer a comprehensive view of African-American life in Arkansas delta towns such as Helena, West Helena, Lake View, Elaine and Marianna.



Now deceased, Johnson's son carries on his legacy and photography studio in its original location. A traveling exhibit of his work has been featured around the Arkansas Delta and is available on display and for purchase at Johnson's Studio in downtown Helena.

Delta Cultural Center
141 Cherry Street, Helena-West Helena
870.338.4351



The Delta Cultural Center, located in historic downtown Helena, interprets the history of the Arkansas Delta. annual events and guided tours tell the story of the region's rich heritage of sights, sounds, people and events. From its blues music to the mighty river that runs through it, the Arkansas Delta story unfolds within this unique Helena landmark and its multiple locations – the Depot, Visitors Center, Moore-Hornor House and Temple Beth El facility.

The Visitors Center, located one block north of the Depot, features the "Delta Sounds" music exhibit and a daily live broadcast of the legendary "King Biscuit Time" radio hour – the longest running blues radio program in the country. Here are the stories of legendary musicians with roots in the Arkansas Delta: blues legends Sonny Boy Williamson, Louis Jordan, Robert Lockwood, Jr., James Cotton, Robert Nighthawk and Albert King.

Gospel music is a true art form in the Arkansas Delta - touching lives regardless of age, race and background. Tell It! Sing It! Shout It! highlights the sacred music of the Arkansas Delta and the performers who gained recognition in the genre. The exhibit features the stories of such gospel greats as Helena-born Roberta Martin, who formed the Roberta Martin Singers and became a dominant force in gospel music for more than 35 years.

Reference: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net

Dixon Cemetery
Phillips Co. Road 239/Great River Road, Helena-West Helena

The focal point of the cemetery is a large, imposing obelisk-type monument marking the grave of the Rev. Elijah Camp Morris, D.D. Morris was the pastor of Centennial Baptist Church in Helena, founder of Arkansas Baptist College, founder and publisher of the Baptist Vanguard, and president of the National Baptist Convention. Members of his family, as well as other African-American families, are buried here. Among these are the influential African-American families of Adams, Anderson, Clark, Cooper, and Drew.

