

# Delta Sources and Resources

---

**Johnny Cash Boyhood Home /  
Historic Dyess Colony**  
110 Center Drive  
Dyess, Arkansas  
by Amy Ulmer

Many visitors to the Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home expect to learn a little about the “Man in Black.” They are often surprised to discover the depth and

story of the 500 families who came to Dyess Colony, the largest and one of the earliest agricultural resettlement communities designed to alleviate rural poverty under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Several economic and natural disasters caused the need for resettlement communities in the United States, especially in the South. In Arkansas, the twenties were anything but “roaring.” The state had been in recession nearly a decade before the Great Depression hit.



Johnny Cash Boyhood Home  
Photograph courtesy of Ruth Hawkins

richness of the history presented at the heritage site established by Arkansas State University. The site tells a larger story—one often overshadowed by Cash’s rise to fame and struggles with drug addiction, and one different from the rags-to-riches narrative that Johnny never appreciated. The ASU Heritage Site also tells the

After the flood of 1927 devastated the land and its people, a year-long drought starting in 1930 hit Arkansas harder than any of the twenty-two states affected. In addition, the stock market crash of 1929 led to bank closures across the state. By the end of 1930, approximately two-thirds of Arkansas’s independent farmers had

lost their farms.

When President Roosevelt took office in 1933, one of his first priorities was bringing about economic recovery from the Great Depression. He created a number of “New Deal” programs as part of his relief efforts for the poor. Many of these involved relocating unemployed workers to subsistence homesteads where they were given jobs and small plots of land to raise enough food to feed their families. W.R. Dyess, Arkansas administrator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration, had a slightly different idea. He successfully proposed a program in Arkansas that would remove previously successful farmers from the relief rolls by relocating them to twenty- and forty-acre farmsteads where they would ultimately produce enough crop income to repay the government.

On March 24, 1935, Ray and Carrie Cash moved their family from Kingsland, Arkansas to the Dyess Colony to start a new life for themselves. Made up of 16,000 acres, the colony was situated in Northeast Arkansas’s “sunken lands,” impacted by a series of earthquakes from 1811 to 1812 that dropped vast tracts of land as far as fifty feet into the earth. Once on the colony, the Cash family and others were faced with the tremendous task of clearing the thickly forested swampland and converting it to agricultural production.

Songs like “Five Feet High and Rising,” which Cash wrote about the 1937 flood, and “Pickin’ Time,” along with a number of others, reveal Cash’s deep connection to Dyess, where he lived from the time he was three years old until he went into the US Air Force at eighteen. Today, little remains of the landscape once dotted with neat white colony houses trimmed in blue, brown, or green. Remnants of the colony—the foundation of the commissary, the arch of the 1944 Dyess High School, and a few colony houses—still stand. Arkansas State University has restored the Boyhood Home and the Colony Circle, which includes the former Administration Building that housed the federal

administrative workers on the colony, as well as the Theatre.

Restoration of the Administration Building was initiated in 2007 through a donation to the City of Dyess from former colonist and country music personality Gene Williams, along with a stabilization grant from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. The building, which functions as a museum and the Dyess City Hall, was donated to ASU in 2010 by the City of Dyess and restored using grant funds from the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council, with support from the Arkansas General Assembly and a Challenge Grant through the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The museum includes several exhibits with photographs, artifacts, and audio-visual aids that explain what the land was like before the colony was established, the conditions in the 1930s that landed Arkansas farmers on the welfare rolls, and how growing up in Dyess influenced Cash’s music. There is also an exhibit room dedicated to Gene Williams. The Theatre, which will soon open to the public, will serve as a Visitor Center and include an orientation film, along with other interpretive materials and exhibits.

Acquiring it through proceeds from the first annual Johnny Cash Music Festival, Arkansas State University purchased the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home from private owners in 2011. The two youngest Cash siblings, Joanne Cash-Yates and Tommy Cash, chose the proper furnishings for the house, which holds their mother’s piano.

As funds become available, other phases of the restoration include recreating the outbuildings (barn, smokehouse, chicken coop, and outhouse) at the Cash home, rebuilding a former colony house adjacent to the Cash home, adding historic signage at locations throughout the community, and developing a walking trail between the Colony Circle and the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home.

Overall goals of the museum are to (1) revive the sense of hope and renewal for Dyess by

strengthening bonds between past and present, town and region, resident and visitor; (2) reestablish the town circle in Dyess as the center of commerce, social life, and governance for the community; (3) recreate a sense of rural life and the historic landscape of Dyess Colony in the 1930s by preserving and reconstructing the associated farmsteads and agricultural fields in the vicinity of the Johnny Cash Boyhood Home; and (4) serve as a receptacle for the memories of those who experienced, survived, and even thrived during one of the most difficult times in the nation's history.

Since the site opened in August 2014, visitors from forty-eight states and forty countries have made their way to the small town of Dyess. The site also helps two Arkansas State University graduate assistants gain work experience in the heritage profession.

Located at 110 Center Drive in Dyess, the Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home opens at 9 a.m., with last tours of the day at 3 p.m., Monday through Saturday. General admission is \$10, with special rates for groups and students. For more information visit [dyesscash.astate.edu](http://dyesscash.astate.edu) or contact the site at 870-764-2274. ▲▼▲

## Bibliography

- Arkansas State University, Historic Dyess Colony On-Site Interpretive Exhibits. 2014. In association with Quatrefoil Associates. March.
- Cash, Johnny. 1975. *The Man in Black*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Hawkins, Van. 2015. *A New Deal in Dyess: The Depression Era Agricultural Resettlement Colony in Arkansas*. Jonesboro: Writers Bloc.
- Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home*. 2016. Accessed March 11, 2016. <http://dyesscash.astate.edu/>.
- John Milner Associates, Inc. 2010. Dyess Colony Redevelopment Master Plan, Dyess, Arkansas. Prepared for Arkansas State University. April.



Administration Building during Grand Opening  
(also showing front façade of theater  
before reconstruction)  
Photograph courtesy of Ruth Hawkins



Rosanne Cash and her daughters in a bedroom of  
the Cash Boyhood Home  
Photograph courtesy of Ruth Hawkins