

Delta Sources and Resources

The Arkansas State Archives
1 Capitol Mall
Little Rock, Arkansas
by W. Stuart Towns, PhD

A growing travel attraction for many people and entire families is heritage tourism. Persons interested in historical locations, museums, historical events, genealogical research, family cemeteries, and sites on the National or State Registers of Historic Places are traveling around their states, the nation and even the world to satisfy these interests. Arkansas is a leading area for this type of tourism and Dr. Ruth Hawkins, Director of the Arkansas State University Heritage Sites, is a major voice in developing historic travel in the state.

There is also a growing interest in a sub-set of heritage tourism, genealogy travel, as de-

scribed by Jeanne Rollberg, a board member of the Arkansas Genealogical Society and the Friends of the Arkansas State Archives. Rollberg points out, "It's the best type of family-oriented customized travel. It involves personal family research, followed up by visiting the historic places in locales of our ancestors, and then seeing where they personally lived, worked, attended church or civic activities, and sometimes viewing their final resting places." But for this travel to be most effective and informative, there has to be a starting point.

For those of us who have spent many a day digging through census reports, diaries, letters, and photographs as we attempt to create a history of our family or of a particular building in our community, or of a church our family and friends have attended and supported for several generations, we see clearly the vital role played



The Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas.
Photograph by W. Stuart Towns.

by our state and regional archives. Not only are the archival materials indispensable to our finding, understanding, writing, and disseminating our stories, but professionally trained staff are essential to the collecting, storing, and preserving of these materials, and helping us locate and use the sources. The Arkansas State Archives is an outstanding resource for learning more about historical events, records, and memorabilia in which you and your family may be interested.

The Arkansas State Archives was founded by the State Legislature in 1905 and today maintains the largest collection of Arkansas archival materials in the world. If you are interested in family genealogy, local, regional, or state history in the Natural State, Little Rock, Powhatan, and Old Washington are the starting points for your research on genealogy and local history.

Charged with collecting, preserving, and disseminating our archival materials, the Arkansas State Archives is the keeper of our heritage and culture for future generations. Historical treasures such as diaries, letters, family histories, family papers, land records, census records, military records, maps, photographs, videos, newspapers, business or organizational records, school records, scrapbooks, film, negatives, and various county, state agency, and federal records that help tell the story of Arkansas' long and interesting history can be found in the three Archives locations around the state.

The Arkansas State Archives headquarters is located in Little Rock on the west side of the Capitol grounds, at 1 Capitol Mall. It includes approximately 13,000 cubic feet of state records and public records from all 75 counties, over half a million photographs and the largest collection of Arkansas newspapers in existence, as well as an extensive collection of Arkansas artifacts and art works. Its digital address is: www.digitalstatearchives.com/arkansas.

There are two other locations of Arkansas State Archives. The Southwest Arkansas Regional Archives (SARA) is the branch of the State Archives located in Historic Washington

State Park, at 201 Highway 195 South, Washington, Arkansas. Its mission is to collect and preserve primary and secondary source materials pertaining to the history of that region and its people and culture. Its collection includes family papers, organizational and business records, printed Arkansas and family histories, photographs, newspapers, maps, and a wealth of other historical materials that document the history of southwest Arkansas. SARA was founded in 1978 by the Hempstead County Historical Society, with assistance from the Arkansas History Commission, Historic Washington State Park, and the Pioneer Washington Restoration Foundation. The Arkansas History Commission acquired SARA in 2008. SARA focuses on a twelve-county region in southwest Arkansas. The twelve counties are: Columbia, Hempstead, Howard, Lafayette, Little River, Miller, Nevada, Ouachita, Pike, Polk, Sevier, and Union. It is open for research Tuesday through Saturday 8:00 to 4:30. Many of its resources are available online through the Arkansas State Archives digital collections site: www.archives.arkansas.gov/sara.

The Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives (NEARA) is the second regional branch of the Arkansas State Archives and is located at 11 Seventh Street, Powhatan, AR. It collects material on a sixteen-county region which includes the counties of Baxter, Clay, Craighead, Crittenden, Cross, Fulton, Greene, Independence, Izard, Jackson, Lawrence, Mississippi, Poinsett, Randolph, Sharp, and Stone. The core of the collections is the Lawrence County court records, which are some of the state's oldest records, dating back to the territorial period of the early nineteenth century. NEARA opened in 2011 and was founded through a partnership between the Arkansas History Commission and Arkansas State Parks. It is located within Powhatan Historic State Park. It is open for research Tuesday through Saturday 8:00 to 4:30. Its Internet address is: www.archives.arkansas.gov/neara.

A fourth equally important feature of the

Arkansas State Archives is the Black History Commission of Arkansas. Having been established by the state legislature in 1991 as the Arkansas Black History Advisory Committee, charged with preserving the history of black Arkansans and promoting the teaching of black history in Arkansas schools, it became the Black History Commission of Arkansas in 2007. Its current mission is to collect black historical materials for the state archives, to encourage research in Arkansas black history, and to cooperate with the Arkansas Department of Education in the development of African American historical materials for use in public schools. The Commission is interested in letters, diaries, journals, business records, photographs, church and lodge records, personal memoirs and anything else of a documentary nature that is related to African American history in Arkansas. Contact them through: www.arkansas.gov/abhac.

In 2015, a state-wide group of historians and genealogists established the “Friends of the Arkansas State Archives” in an effort to provide support for the activities and needs of the Archives. It is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to support, promote and

strengthen the collections, services, and programs of the Arkansas State Archives. Benefits of membership include invitations to pre-register for Archives’ events prior to the general public, receive the newsletters of the Friends and of the Arkansas State Archives, be eligible to vote in the annual members meeting, and, probably most importantly, have an opportunity to network with a community of professional and lay historians interested in preserving Arkansas history. Donations are tax deductible, and membership is offered on a variety of levels for supporting the mission of the Arkansas State Archives: Basic \$10, Sustaining \$25, Organization \$35, Benefactor \$50, Lifetime \$200, and Corporate \$500. Contact Friends of the Arkansas State Archives, P.O. Box 259016, Little Rock, AR 72225. Its Internet address is: www.ararchivesfriends.org. ▲▼▲

Author’s Note: Most of this material came from various documents describing the work of the Arkansas State Archives, SARA, NEARA, the Black History Commission, and the Friends of the Arkansas Archives and disseminated by these organizations.



Northeast Arkansas Regional Archives, Powhatan, Arkansas.
Photograph by W. Stuart Towns