Welcome to Davidsonville

If you didn't know it, the clearing near the banks of the Black River in Davidsonville Historic State Park would be nothing more than that: a clearing. This clearing, though, is so much more! It is the location of a once vibrant little town on the edge of the American frontier called Davidsonville. It only survived for fifteen years in the early 19th century, but it holds some of Arkansas’s oldest recorded history.

a town created

Before Arkansas was a territory, the land known today as Arkansas was apart of the Missouri Territory. In January 1815, the Missouri Territorial Assembly established Lawrence County, consisting of roughly the northern half of present-day Arkansas and a portion of southern Missouri. Missouri Governor William Clark then appointed commissioners to “choose a suitable place...on which to erect public buildings and establish the permanent seat of justice.” The commissioners located and purchased a piece of land on the banks of the Black River from five Frenchmen.

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first Post Office and Courthouse

Davidsonville was platted in 1815 by surveyor James Boyd. Arkansas’s first two-story courthouse was in the center of the town square.

In 1815, the town square was laid out according to a surveyed plan. Thus, Davidsonville became the first platted (or planned) town in what would later be known as Arkansas. The plan consisted of a large public square surrounded by eight blocks, each containing six lots, and a strip of land referred to as “the commons” that lay between the town and the Black River. The streets of Davidsonville were carefully surveyed to be 57 and 3/4 feet wide, indicating the town planners expected Davidsonville to grow into a bustling, prosperous city.

Arkansas Riverfront

Periodically, emigrants came to Davidsonville to porting life for the public as it was when Davidsonville was more than just an open clearing.

In the 1820’s, travelers to Davidsonville reported seeing 15 to 20 dwellings. These would have been mostly log. Although on the frontier, some homes had glass windows and brick chimneys. Each house would have been surrounded by outbuildings, gardens and fences forming “urban farmsteads.” Private homes also tended to double as businesses like the post office, tavern, inn and various mercantile stores.

The residents of Davidsonville included trappers, traders and families. Native Americans traded at the town or came for meetings with government officials. The Arkansas frontier then included Delawares, Shawnee, Cherokee, Choctaw and other tribes. African-Americans were also present in Davidsonville. Court records document cases where free black men indentured themselves for food and shelter, and men of the county would sometimes register documents freeing a particular female slave along with her mulatto children.

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in Davidsonville

Two cemeteries are located on the outskirts of Davidsonville - the Scott Cemetery and the Phillips-Reeves Cemetery. It is likely that the Phillips-Reeves Cemetery, named for the families who still use it, was established by the residents of Davidsonville. The Scott Cemetery is thought to have been started in the 1880’s by the Scott family who moved to the area to farm and operate the ferry.

Other than the public square, the riverfront, or “commons,” was the most important location in Davidsonville. Here, the flatboats, keelboats and other river craft were loaded and unloaded, and it is where the ferry crossed the river. The Black River, and other linked waterways, connected Davidsonville to the Mississippi River, and thus to rest of the United States and the world. Steamboats did not appear on the Black River until after Davidsonville had become a ghost town.
Decline of Davidsonville

Davidsonville Historic State Park was established in 1957 in order to preserve and protect this historical treasure. In addition to providing exhibits and programs about Davidsonville, the Arkansas State Park system has been working in conjunction with the Arkansas Archeological Survey to learn more about this site through excavations.

Starting in 1979, the Arkansas Archeological Survey has been conducting excavations to learn more about this historic site. Excavations continue today and pieces of the mystery surrounding Davidsonville are constantly being unearthed.

Though little evidence of the town’s existence is evident above the ground today, a wealth of information is still intact underground. Davidsonville is a unique archeological site. Unlike its contemporaries, Memphis and St. Louis, whose archeological records have been destroyed by continual redevelopment, the settlement of Davidsonville has been relatively undisturbed since the last residents left around 1830. Also, due to the limited life span of Davidsonville, artifacts from the site are relatively easy to date.

Archeological work began on the site in 1979 and continues today. Archeologists have recovered tens of thousands of artifacts including pieces of brick, silverware, tea cups, wine bottles and window glass. Every artifact uncovered helps the archeologists and the staff at Davidsonville Historic State Park better understand the everyday lives of these people who lived on the American frontier.

In addition to the artifacts, historical documents also provide information about the everyday lives of the residents of Davidsonville. Miraculously, court records, wills, deeds, marriage records and other official documents have survived these nearly two hundred years.

Location: To reach Davidsonville Historic State Park; from U.S. Highway 63 at Black Rock take State Highway 361 north 6 miles, or from Pocahontas take U.S. Highway 62 west 2 miles, then State Highway 166 south 9 miles to the park.

To reach Powhatan State Park from U.S. Highway 63 at Black Rock, take State Highway 25 south 2 miles.

Camping is not available at Powhatan Courthouse, but is available at Old Davidsonville and at Lake Charles State Park, 3 miles south of Powhatan on State Highway 25.

For further information on park services, campsites, tours and programs, contact:

Old Davidsonville State Park
7953 Hwy. 166 South
Pocahontas, AR 72455
Phone: (870) 892-4708
Email: olddavidson@arkansas.com

For information on Arkansas’ other fine state parks, contact:

Arkansas State Parks
One Capitol Mall
Little Rock, AR 72201
Phone: (501) 682-1191
www.ArkansasStateParks.com

The site of Davidsonville is protected by state and federal laws. Excavating or searching for artifacts or other material on state park property is prohibited. Please protect this important historical site by leaving all archeological evidence, above or below the ground, undisturbed.