

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

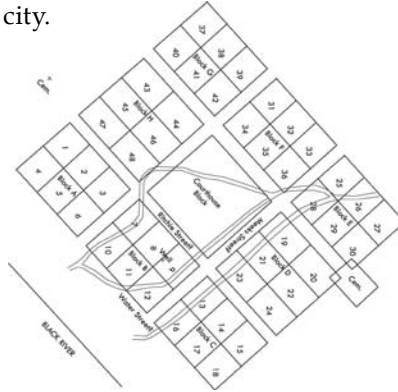
Arkansas and a portion of southern Missouri. Missouri Governor William Clark then appointed commissioners to "choose a suitable place...on which to erect public buildings and establish the permanent seat of justice." The commissioners located and purchased a piece of land on the banks of the Black River from five Frenchmen.



Map from 1819 when Arkansas became a territory. Note that Davidsonville, Washington and Arkansas Post are the only towns shown.

It was decided that this town would not develop as a random collection of houses and businesses, but instead would be 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.



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

first Post Office and Courthouse

Davidsonville is the site of the earliest post office in Arkansas, with Adam Ritchey officially appointed Postmaster on June 28, 1817. Ritchey was the first of five postmasters at Davidsonville. Mail arrived by horseback roughly every 30 days en route from St. Louis to Arkansas Post. Completed in 1822, the two-story brick courthouse in Davidsonville was the first in the state. Although the court house was not finished until 1822, court had already been held in private homes and businesses in Davidsonville. On July 8, 1818, the first Lawrence County court session was recorded. Stephen F. Austin, famed as the founder of Texas, briefly presided over the Lawrence County Circuit Court before heading on to Texas. Court continued to meet in the Lawrence County Courthouse at Davidsonville until 1829. Many original, handwritten court records from Davidsonville still exist today.

in Davidsonville

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 Delaware, Shawnee, Cherokee, Osage, 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.



Periodically, re-enactors come to Davidsonville to portray 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.

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 1880s by the Scott family who moved to the area to farm and operate the ferry.



This log cabin, located at the Historical Arkansas Museum in downtown Little Rock, Arkansas, is believed to have been built between 1830 and 1840. There is evidence showing that most of the houses in Davidsonville would have been log cabins, possibly like this one.

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.



Local waterways transported the residents of Davidsonville all the way to the Mississippi River. These waterways allowed the residents to have access to all the finer things in life, as well as to communicate with the outside world.

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,



Pieces of china are among the most abundant artifacts found at Davidsonville and remind us that the residents of Davidsonville had access to all the fineries in life.

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.



Personal items like jaw harps and dice are among the tens of thousands of artifacts found at Davidsonville. These items show us that the residents of Davidsonville had time for leisure activities like we do today.

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
E-MAIL: 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.

