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Arkadelphia entrepreneurs provide lodging for visitors

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

From Arkadelphia's earliest days, various entrepreneurs have engaged in hosting visitors, whether in the form of restaurants or hotels. Little is known about those earliest businesses, but local legends surrounding some of those enterprises offer some interesting insights into life during the 1800s.

Arkadelphia's first permanent settlers arrived in the first years of the nineteenth century, for after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, more and more Americans began to move west of the Mississippi River. Among the earliest settlers was Adam Blakely, who operated a blacksmith shop beginning about 1810, and for whom the town was first named—Blakelytown. William Blakely was granted a tavern license in 1824. Perhaps he also offered food and lodging. Unfortunately, a precise location or other information is not known.

It is believed that the first hotel in Arkadelphia was operated by Jonathan O. Callaway, who arrived in Clark County with his parents in about 1817. The family lived on a farm near

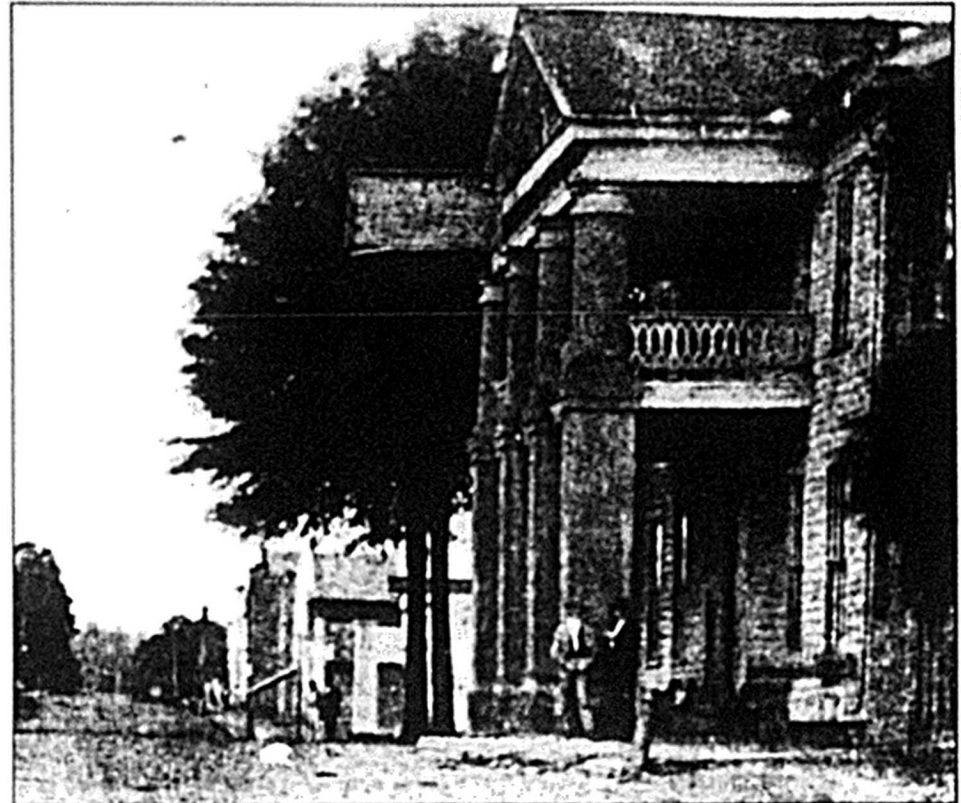
the Caddo River, but in the early 1830s Callaway moved to Blakelytown and opened a store. When the county seat moved from Greenville to Arkadelphia (the town's new name coming into use around 1840), he built a two-story log house near the northwest corner of Johnston and Trigg (now Fourth and Main streets), and operated a tavern and hotel there for more than a decade. Apparently the place did a thriving business, especially when court was in session. Attorneys and others involved in court proceedings utilized the place, since it was the only place to serve visitors. Sometime in the 1850s the log structure was torn down and replaced with a more substantial building.

Arkadelphia has been described as a "prosperous little town" as of 1860. It was Arkansas's seventh-largest city (population, 817) and had the courthouse, four churches, a commercial district, and the Arkansas Institute for the Blind. Solomon Spence had taken charge of the town's new hotel and operated it until the structure burned in 1872. Local historian Farrar Newberry described Spence as "efficient

in his work, affable, and civic-minded." Sadly, Spence survived the 1872 fire by only a few months. According to local lore, L.W. Marbury is believed to have also run a hotel at this time, competing with Spence.

In 1874, the Southern Standard newspaper described an operation by John D. Ray on Johnston (Main) Street as the "only hotel for public convenience in the city." Ray was a dentist who "took in boarders" at his brick home. However, the Reames House, built by R.E. Reames, enjoyed increased business in town following the arrival of the railroad. In the 1880s the Standard called the establishment "the leading and practically the only first class hotel in the city." Reames eventually went out of business, and the structure deteriorated. It stood until 1925. Interestingly, Reames had two daughters named "Snow" and "Frost."

In the meantime, the Hall House was constructed at 407 Main, and the City Hotel faced east on Sixth, between Crittenden and Carpenter. The City Hotel was purchased by J.H. Spencer and operated



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Arkadelphia, circa 1870. The Spence Hotel is the large building with columns. It burned in 1872.

as the Spencer House from about 1885 to 1905. The Standard then called it the "city's leading hotel." Farrar Newberry recalled eating his "very first hotel meal" at the Spencer House: "My father, preparing to move from Gurdon to Arkadelphia and looking for a house to rent, brought me

up with him one day. I was only seven, and extremely timid to boot, and recall the kindness of Mr. Spence as he urged me to eat more and more from the many little dishes which surrounded my plate. It was the first time I had ever seen food served that way."

For additional informa-

tion about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245.5332).