



News from the Prairie

AUTUMN 2023

PRESERVING OUR GRAND PRAIRIE REGION'S HISTORY

GPHS Participated in Cemetery Marker Dedication

A new historical marker plaque was dedicated at the Love Rest Green Grove Cemetery in Stuttgart on Saturday, October 14. The cemetery has served as a final resting place for many of the area's African American citizens over the years, dating back to at least 1879. The Love Rest Green Grove Cemetery Corporation, with assistance from this organization, obtained the marker through a grant from the Curtis H. Sykes Memorial Foundation, approved by the Black History Commission of Arkansas. Cemetery Corporation President Mrs. Nell Johnson emceed the dedication, which began with a prayer led by Mrs. Onteaka Scott. A welcome was given by Stuttgart Alderman Eugene Robinson Jr. Mrs. Johnson introduced the Cemetery Corporation board members, and recognized the community helpers who volunteered their time in removing a large amount of storm debris to prepare the cemetery for the ceremony. Director Glenn Mosenthin of the Historical Society thanked Mrs. Johnson for her assistance throughout the planning process, and the Black History Commission for making possible the grant for the marker plaque. The text was read by Mrs. Linda Rice. Afterward, Mrs. Chicurby Evans gave closing remarks to conclude the dedication.

The marker's wording is as follows: "Green Grove Cemetery got its official beginning when Mr. Martin and Ms. Minnie Buerkle sold two acres of property to the Trustees of Green Grove Cemetery Association in September of 1903. This cemetery was likely the first burial ground dedicated to serving Stuttgart's growing African American population. From Arkansas County Courthouse documents, it has been established that two burials took place prior to the sale of the land: Ms. Etta Ellis, born December 22, 1862, died August 19, 1879; and Ms. Hannah Rayford, born in 1864, died July 4, 1888. It is believed that the Trustees either sold or gave a portion of the land to businessman and founder of Relerford and Son Funeral Home, Mr. James Wesley Relerford, who was Stuttgart's first Black mortician. As we have seen, there are death certificates with place of interment Green Grove Cemetery and others with place of interment Love Rest Cemetery. Mr. Relerford himself is interred in Love Rest Cemetery in addition to his son and successor, Mr. Booker Theodore Relerford and several members of the Relerford family.

The Black community has grown to call the cemeteries "Love Rest Green Grove Cemetery," one cemetery with two locations. Mr. Mack Skinner, Stuttgart's first Black master plumber and first Black elected school board official, is interred in Love Rest Cemetery. Additionally, several members and speakers at the Stuttgart Negro Civic League of the 1960s era are residents of both Green Grove and Love Rest, as are several World War I and World War II veterans. Green Grove hails Professor Leroy Davis Holman, the educator for whom Holman School is named. Viet Nam War veteran PFC Robert Lee Ramsey, Jr., U.S.M.C. is also among its icons. Over time the cemetery footprints became obscured and its early history almost forgotten due to inactivity, as the cemetery had only three plots remaining in it by January 1978. We are dedicated to keeping alive the memories of all whom we hold dear who are resting in Love Rest Green Grove Cemetery."

Grand Prairie Historical Society thanks Kenneth Graves and Director Travis Trice for their efforts in installing the marker and post. The ceremony took place in the presence of around forty attendees. Community volunteers did a masterful job of clearing the cemetery of several large downed trees, as well as mowing and weeding the grounds in time for the event.



(l. to r.):

Johnny Chambers
Linda Rice
Nell Johnson
Onteaka Scott
Chicurby Evans
Eugene Robinson

Society Celebrated 70th Anniversary at Arts Center

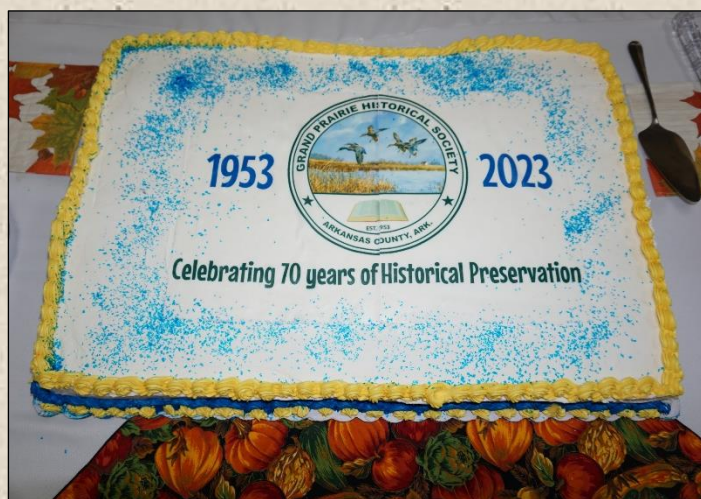
Grand Prairie Historical Society observed its 70th anniversary Thursday, October 19 at the Arts Center of the Grand Prairie in Stuttgart. The Society was founded December 8, 1953 at a meeting in the Stuttgart High School Library at Ninth and Lowe Streets, site of today's Senior Center. A special anniversary-themed cake was served to attendees during the social hour before the program. Arts Center Director Charles Law welcomed attendees and recapped the Center's history and background. Fittingly, the presentation by Secretary Jessie Walsh was on the career of Stuttgart artist Andrew "Pete" Finken, an early GPHS officer and founder of the Grand Prairie Arts Council. More on Mr. Finken can be found in the October 2019 *Grand Prairie Historical Bulletin*.

A presentation was made by GPHS Director Glenn Mosenthin on the history of the Society, outlining the many accomplishments of the organization over the years following its 1953 founding. Special guest Mrs. Nell Johnson, president of the Love Rest Green Grove Cemetery Corporation, thanked the Society for its help in obtaining the recent historical marker plaque for the cemetery. During the business meeting, officers and directors were elected for terms beginning 2024. These are Linda Fischer, Stuttgart, president; Gay Hampton Rusk, Stuttgart, vice president; Jessie Walsh, Stuttgart, secretary; Raeann Refeld Braithwaite, Almyra, treasurer. Directors are Claudia Ahrens, Bill Shrum, Tommy Strabala, Travis Trice, Dr. Richard Wilson (all of Stuttgart), and Glenn Mosenthin, Searcy. The Society's parliamentarian is Glennda Refeld Fread, Almyra.

The next meeting of the Society will take place on January 18 at the Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie in Stuttgart. Other meetings scheduled for 2024 are: April 18, Arkansas Post Museum State Park; July 18, Phillips Community College-DeWitt (featuring our annual potluck dinner); and October 17, Arts Center of the Grand Prairie. The public is always welcome to attend. The Society offers three annual membership levels, beginning at \$25.00. Members receive the award-winning *Grand Prairie Historical Bulletin* in April and October, plus quarterly newsletters. Visit grandprairiehistory.org; www.facebook.com/grandprairiehistory; or contact Raeann Braithwaite at P.O. Box 15, Almyra, AR 72003. See photos from our seventieth anniversary meeting on the following page.



Back row: Paul Braithwaite, Bill Shrum, Glennda Fread, Steve Stillwell, Walter Carle, Travis Trice, Dr. Richard Wilson, Charles Anderson, Barbara Holt-Bryant, Cara Curtis, Fara Foster, Linda Fischer, Claudia Ahrens. Middle: Raeann Braithwaite, Kay Sparks, Shelly Barber, Jessie Walsh, Lisa Anderson, Gay Rusk, Betty Fuhrman, Barbara Menard, Vicky Wilson. Front: Marsha Heien, Nell Johnson, Glenn Mosenthin.



GPHS members (l to r) Vicky Wilson, Claudia Ahrens, and Linda Fischer serve anniversary cake to attendees.

Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie Sponsored Interpretive Walk in Stuttgart

The Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie hosted a walking tour through the Stuttgart Commercial Historic District on Thursday, Oct. 12. Rachel Patton of Preserve Arkansas led the tour from First Street to Sixth Street along Main. Patton also serves as president of the Arkansas Historical Association. Museum Executive Director Fara Foster said Patton first led the interpretive program through downtown Stuttgart in 2012. "Several guests had specifically requested an updated tour," Foster said. Patton gave historical information on the community, and of the businesses housed in the various buildings during the early history of Stuttgart."

Director Foster credited people like Glenn Mosenthin, the Grand Prairie Historical Society, the Museum's past directors Gena Seidenschwarz and Pat Peacock, and others who have worked hard to preserve the photography and a lot of the historical stories of the buildings. "It is interesting to hear the pride among some of our retailers in the business along Main. They know the history of those buildings. They are just as excited about sharing what they know with the public as we are," Foster said. She plans another walking tour on October 21.



Preserve Arkansas Director Rachel Patton leads the walking tour of downtown Stuttgart on October 12.



The Founding and Accomplishments of the Grand Prairie Historical Society

Grand Prairie Historical Society was founded in December 1953 by a group of public-spirited persons from across our region, whose aim was to preserve the area's rich abundant history and make others aware of this heritage. Here are the minutes of the first meeting of our organization, taken 70 years ago:

At a meeting of a group of citizens of Stuttgart, DeWitt, St. Charles, and guests from Little Rock, held Dec. 8, 1953 in the high school auditorium, an organization was completed, to be known as Grand Prairie Historical Society. Rev. Lawrence Maus, pastor at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church at Slovak was chairman of the meeting. The following officers were unanimously elected: President, J. E. Howard, Stuttgart; Vice-pres., J. M. Henderson, DeWitt; Secretary, Mrs. Jerry Young, Stuttgart; Treasurer, Ballard Deane, St. Charles. The president appointed the following committee to frame a constitution and by-laws: Grover Carnes, Dr. H. V. Glenn, Arthur Macom, and Mrs. Jerry Young.

The following Little Rockians, all prominent in state and civic organizations, assisted in the organization: Mrs. John F. Weinmann, President of the Arkansas Historical Association; Mrs. Charles Loewer, Commissioner of the State Capitol Restoration; Claude Rankin, Commissioner of State Lands; Sam Dickinson of the Arkansas Democrat editorial staff; and George Ware of the State Land Office. After discussion of routine matters and plans, the meeting adjourned until a date to be set by the President. (signed) J. E. Howard (signed) Lillian C. Young, Secretary

Our charter member and longtime officer Garner Allen said it best at our 25th anniversary meeting in 1978 when he stated that those prominent state officials from Little Rock "served as midwives to the birth of the Grand Prairie Historical Society." Mr. Allen went on to say "Father Maus chaired the meeting, and we hear the late Dr. H. V. Glenn observe that "Perhaps we are starting fifty years too late." Both went on to become presidents of the Arkansas Historical Association. There was mention that night of a far-out ideal of a Mississippi River Parkway from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, which just might be routed through Arkansas County. Mr. Deane had corresponded with Congressman Norrell on that subject. Father Maus viewed the new historical society as something that would make citizens aware of their traditions and thereby exert a stabilizing tendency on them. "If the people and children of Arkansas are conscious of their background," he said, "they will tend to identify themselves with their forefathers. The state's loss of population is not for economic reasons alone."

Allen continued, "They elected a lawyer to the board that night by the name of Arthur Macom, and years later that flower blossomed. He was the guy who, as a member of the Quorum Court, volunteered his services to defend Arkansas County in a suit to decide if a county could get into the museum business. Arthur dug up an old riverboat museum case in Kentucky for the successful precedent. Our first meeting at DeWitt was on July 19, 1955, and then in January 1956, we had a meeting in St. Charles. Mrs. Beatie Gregory came to Stuttgart that April and invited the society to meet in Gillett—and things haven't been the same since. We have had strong leadership from Gillett.

"In 1958 Boyd Johnson, then the St. Charles school superintendent and author of a state history textbook, came on board—a most fortunate event because he was to become the society's first *Bulletin* editor by vote that night. And Pete Finken, that wonderful old machinist with the big heart and soul and the talented fingers, came forward with an offer to design its cover—you all remember the one that continued through the Civil War Centennial. On January 20, 1959, the society received its first *Bulletin*. Somewhere during that time, we were going regularly to Gillett. Ovie and Helen Bradford had come to Arkansas Post, and that fortunate occurrence marked a new era of enthusiasm and support for doing something with the facility. We had our oars in via Rep. Norrell for it to become a National Memorial. But we learned that the Federals didn't want but a very small part of the existing artifacts and collections. The Society moved swiftly, with a lot of help from the folks at Gillett, in acquiring a site for the Arkansas Post County Museum.

“Humphrey’s Jack Crum came with an offer that started the discussions and Bennie Burkett had the fire and determination to make it a reality. And, presto—we have a very fine second county museum devoted to agriculture, where we are gathered tonight. Then there’s Jean Pollard, who did yeoman’s work over three years of the nation’s bicentennial on a stage which, I believe, the Grand Prairie Historical Society had a major role in providing. I could not pass without recalling the devoted Thelma Mattmiller, first curator of the Post Museum, or our longtime *Bulletin* editor, Sibyl Hightower, or our current curators, Myrtle Bergschneider and Helen Boyd. Others are Edwin Bearss, National Park Service historian; Director John Ferguson of the Ark. History Commission, who has never failed to respond to call; our long line of Memorial superintendents personified here tonight by D. L. Huggins; and, our expert historical and genealogical researcher, Dorothy Core. As they say, the list goes on and on. It has been a good 25 years of association with some of the finest folks you’ll find anywhere; and I know all of us here tonight can see only more bright things in the future life of our Society.”

I think Garner Allen hit the nail on the head with that last statement. Here we are 45 years on at our 70th birthday, and the exact same sentiment can be expressed. A few quick facts and figures about our organization: More than 1,700 people have been members over the Society’s existence. Our journal, the *Historical Bulletin*, now numbers 152 issues, and boasts 27 awards from the Arkansas Historical Association for its articles and overall presentation. It was the eighth county historical journal to be established in our state. The Society has participated in countless heritage preservation events over its history. We have hosted the Arkansas Historical Association’s annual conference three times, and our Society has seen three members become president of that esteemed organization, and six members have served as trustees.

The Society conducted Civil War Centennial observances at Arkansas Post and St. Charles in 1963. Markers were dedicated at locations of historical significance throughout the region. We led several U. S. Bicentennial observances in Arkansas County in 1976. The Society led a Civil War Sesquicentennial re-enactment in 2013, placed a corresponding marker, and led Arkansas County’s Bicentennial observance later that same year. We co-sponsored the microfilming of old county records, cleaned and stored newly found county documents, and are active in an ongoing effort to restore our oldest and most fragile county record books, some of the earliest such county records west of the Mississippi River.

The Society has published two books, *Catholic Register of Arkansas* and *Arkansas Colonials*. Our members have authored a number of books over the years, including *Memories of Little Cubie* by Bill Shrum; *General J. O. Shelby at Clarendon, Arkansas* by Don Roth; *Gillett, Arkansas: Celebrating 100 Years* by John and Linda Cover; *Community Midwives* by Barbara Holt-Bryant; and *Images of America: Stuttgart* by Glenn Mosenthin. Our longtime member Judge Morris S. Arnold has published several books and essays on the life and times of Colonial Arkansas, focusing on our beloved Arkansas Post. In recent years we established an essay contest for students and created a website and Facebook page. Because of the many contributions of our outstanding members, we are well positioned to continue our outreach efforts for the foreseeable future.

(This report was read to the October 19, 2023 GPHS meeting at the Arts Center of the Grand Prairie by Glenn Mosenthin.)

GPHS sends our *Historical Bulletin* to the following institutional and organizational recipients: Arkansas State Archives, Allen County (Indiana) Public Library, Arkansas Genealogical Society, Arkansas Post Museum State Park, Arkansas Post National Memorial, Arkansas State Library, Arkansas State University, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Delta Historical Society, Clark County Historical Association, Cornell University Library, Desha County Museum, DeWitt High School Library, DeWitt Public Library, Family Search Library (Salt Lake City), Fort Smith Historical Society, Gillett Public Library, Greene County Historical Society, Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie, PCCUA DeWitt Campus Library, PCCUA Stuttgart Campus Library, Pine Bluff-Jefferson County Library, Pope County Library, St. Charles Museum, Stuttgart High School Library, Stuttgart Public Library, University of Arkansas Library, University of Central Arkansas Library, and the Wisconsin Historical Society.



Undated view of the Univ. of Ark. Rice Branch Experiment Station. *Museum of the Arkansas Grand Prairie.*



Julia Shannon Grade School, looking northwest from Fourth & Leslie Streets, Stuttgart. Date unknown. *MAGP.*



143 cast-iron markers like this example from the original Arkansas Post State Park grounds were placed across the state during the 1936 centennial in partnership with the Arkansas History Commission, to commemorate significant people, places, and events of Arkansas's first 100 years. As far as is known, this was the only one of the plaques to be installed in Arkansas County. *Arkansas Post Museum State Park.*

Grand Prairie Historical Society

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organization.