



Something About Benton, Arkansas

Abstract

This file contains the creative nonfiction narrative "Something About Benton, Arkansas". It is intended for fans of travel, architecture, and Arkansas history as well as enterprising minds in the hospitality and service industries. The objective of this piece is to encourage readers to explore the world around them and conceive new and exciting possibilities for it.

Something About Benton, Arkansas

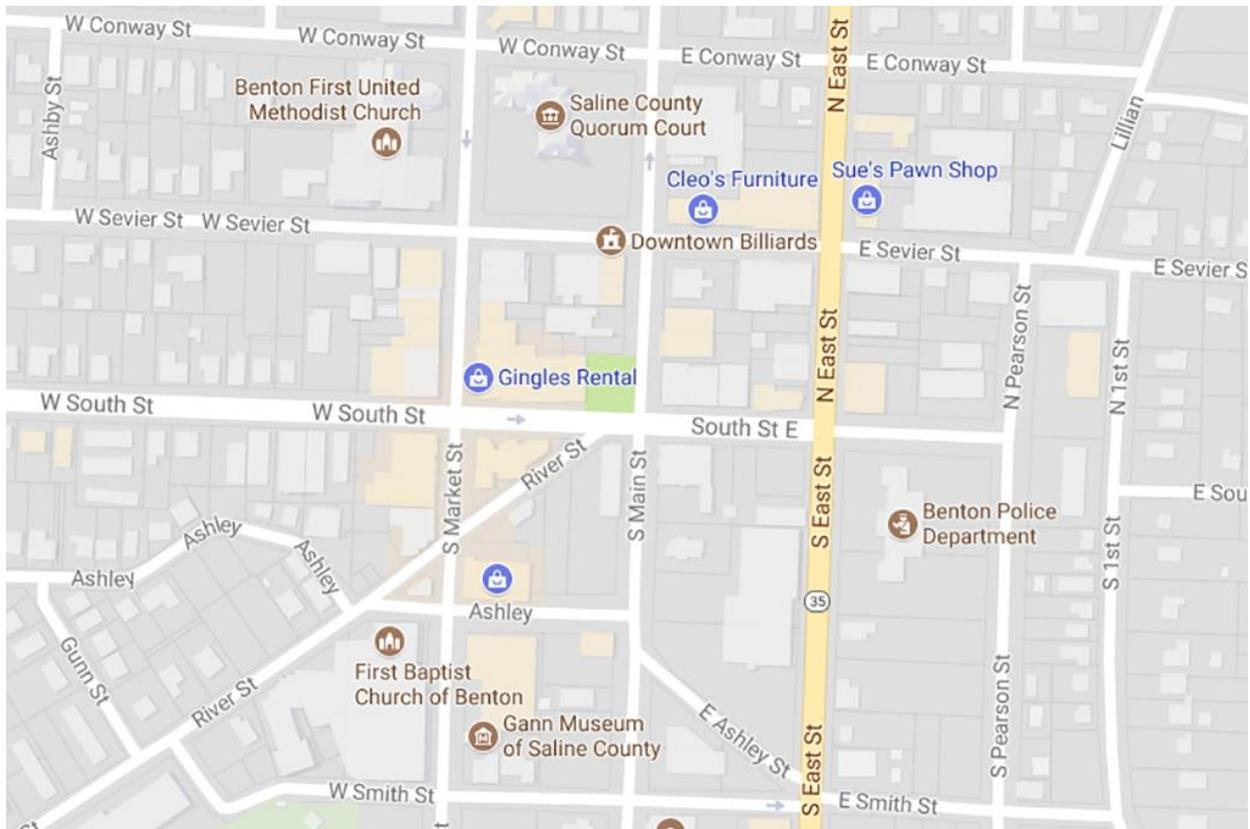


It was an unseasonably warm November afternoon. I set out for downtown Benton, Arkansas to shoot additional photos for my final writing project – yes, the narrative you’re reading right now – in one of the rhetoric courses I took this semester. As you’ll see, the purpose of this project is to construct an engaging narrative through a combination of words and images. Downtown Benton was an ideal setting, having previously utilized it for practicing architecture and street photography as well as blogging about certain aspects of it.

It wasn’t just visual materials I needed, however. Prior to that afternoon, I hadn’t been there in quite some time. Looking over my first draft of this project, which is more a collection of pieces than a focused narrative, it became clear that I needed a fresh perspective on my setting. And it’s a good thing I realized this, because there have been some changes to downtown Benton since I was last there. If I’m going to conceptualize on what it could be, I should be up-to-date on its current state of affairs. Without further ado, I grabbed my camera and hit the road.

What is Benton?

I'm not going to oversell Benton, Arkansas as being some tiny jewel hidden slightly away from the hustle-and-bustle (so to speak) of Little Rock. With a population of 35,000, Benton is essentially a suburb of Little Rock, although many of its inhabitants act as if the two cities reside in different hemispheres. Local weirdness aside, it's nothing out of the ordinary, with most of the excitement centered on its growing collection of chain restaurants and retail stores over the past decade. The sort of development that may be economically-beneficial yet is culturally boring.

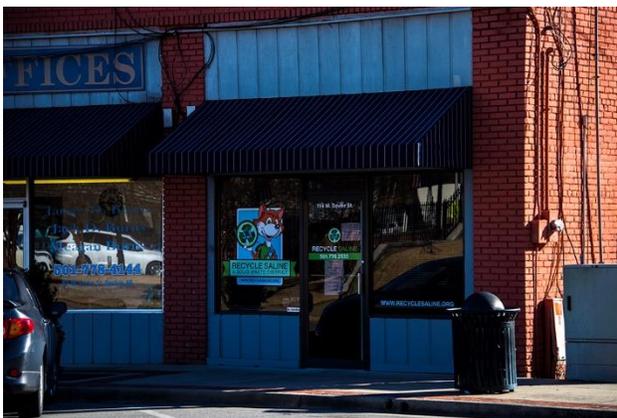


Having lived in neighboring Bryant on and off since moving to Arkansas, Benton has come in handy for shopping purposes if I need something that Bryant can't provide and I don't have any other reason to drive into Little Rock. Benton's other saving grace where I'm concerned is its downtown area, which serves as a convenient and ideal location for me to brush up on urban and architecture photography. It's small, but never crowded, and parking is free. It's also closer to my home than Little Rock's ridiculously overrated River Market district. While it doesn't appear to be anything special, there is a certain charm about it: a charm rooted in remnants of a bygone era combined with the raw potential for a prosperous reinvention. At least, that's how my imagination sees it.

See You in Court



It all starts at the Saline County Courthouse, and today is no exception. Like the entirety of downtown Benton, the courthouse is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. More importantly, it's a great place to park. With its unique Romanesque Revival architecture, the courthouse marks the northern edge of downtown. As I sit in my truck and get my camera ready, I notice workers assembling perhaps the most minimalist Christmas displays I've ever seen. Although I wanted to get a few shots of this, I know how people can be about being photographed in public even with no reasonable expectation of privacy.



Instead, I turn my attention to the red brick building directly across the street that houses a pool hall, law office, and Recycle Saline. The last one is merely the county's sanitation department, but with a hoity-toity name. It is known for proudly selling \$5 vouchers that the county landfill refuses to honor as well as hosting an annual fashion show featuring clothes made from garbage. I'm not exaggerating

any of this in the slightest. I don't care if they get upset over their office being photographed; in fact, I hope they do.

Market Street



The courthouse is bordered on the west by Market Street. While downtown encompasses more than this, there is a lot of architectural charm packed into this drag just around the corner. As I walked down the street with camera and telephoto lens in hand, and rocked a sleeveless t-shirt in late November, I was surprised by how much traffic there was. Overall business in downtown seems to have picked up since I was last here; while I was glad to see this, none of it was terribly exciting.



There is a pet shop that has seemingly been here forever and a Merle Norman store, which is the sort of brand that has a strong enough following to draw customers to virtually any location. Many of the businesses on this street are of the home wares variety, or service-oriented such as hair salons and jewelry repair shops. There's also a pawn shop and multiple attorneys and financial planners.



Not all is well on Market Street, however. The now-defunct Flying Pig restaurant personifies an unfulfilled dream as the banner that proudly announced to the world that this barbecue joint was open for business remains in place, but with the top right-hand corner drooping sadly to let us know that things didn't work out as planned. For what it's worth, the reviews I found online were largely positive.



Although downtown Benton appeared rather busy for a Tuesday afternoon, I couldn't help but think how these types of businesses are also a staple of dying malls. And in a way, it does remind me of a one-story indoor mall that has seen its best days pass it by. As such, it's almost fitting that there is a tiny indoor mall hidden in plain sight on the corner of Market and South. The old Gingles department store building now serves as

the location of various boutiques selling clothing, accessories, home decor, and the like. From what I've just read online, it seems to be doing okay. I would have gone inside if not for having my camera with me.



Regardless, I kept walking and shooting photos between passing vehicles. The sun didn't entirely cooperate with me that afternoon, so I made do as best I could. I have a lifelong habit of accomplishing things while having little with which to work, and I think that's the primary appeal downtown Benton holds for me. It may not appear to be much on the surface, but I see the potential it has for hospitality and entertainment. Not only is there a

significant number of people living in the general vicinity of Benton, but it's located right along the Interstate 30 corridor between Little Rock and Dallas. There's a lot of traffic on that road at any given time.



When looking at downtown Benton, I can't help but think of downtown El Dorado in the mid-2000s. At that time, it was home to a small, yet thriving nightlife scene. Two popular nightclubs were The Depot and the split-level live music venue/dance club Einstein's. These places were oodles of fun, and I can't think of a better way to spend a Saturday night in southern Arkansas in those days. I don't exaggerate when I state that it was an

enjoyable scene, and it made El Dorado one of my favorite places to visit as I regularly traveled the state. Downtown Benton has all the ingredients to achieve something special of its own along those lines.

Royal Treatment

As I continued south on Market, I passed a large and unoccupied building on the corner that has a large "sold" sign on its facade. I crossed the street, and that brought me to the Royal Theatre.



This presents a small beacon of hope that nightlife could work in downtown Benton. It appears to be doing quite well in terms of hosting theatrical productions on a regular basis. I'm not a fan of the theatre, and I got my fill years ago when I dated a stage actress; regardless, it is a cool-looking building with its art deco architecture, signage, and marquee. Like the courthouse, it holds its own spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

Immediately next door to the Royal Theatre is a small diner named Burger Shack that is relatively new. Previously, the space was occupied by Jerry Van Dyke's Soda Shoppe. Yes, that Jerry Van Dyke. Star of everyone's favorite sitcom, *My Mother the Car*. Van Dyke also owned the Royal Theatre for a few years in the late 1990s. How's that for star power?

In the past, the absence of a downtown Benton nightlife was a direct result of Saline County being dry. This is no longer the case, but there is still the matter of both city municipal codes and state liquor laws. While I could not locate Benton's municipal codes online, the general rule in Arkansas is that liquor licenses will not be issued to businesses located within 1,000 yards of a church, school, or daycare. With two churches located downtown, it's safe to assume why there are no liquor stores in the area, much less any bars or nightclubs.

Outside of attempting to invoke eminent domain on not one, but two church buildings, there's probably no way around this, and that's a shame. A downtown Benton nightlife scene makes too much sense as a viable alternative for law-abiding citizens who are increasingly wary of partying in Little Rock's River Market and don't want to drive all the way to Hot Springs. The combination of an upstanding demographic and the close proximity of the Benton Police Department would ensure that the streets remain safe at night. All the necessary ingredients are present.

End of the Line

I continued walking down market to the edge of downtown as I passed a furniture store and a financial planner as well as a ridiculously huge Baptist church. Still, it's worth walking this far to see the Gann House and Museum.

I remember the first time I stumbled upon these structures while taking photos in downtown Benton. As soon as I began to think that I'd reached the end of the line where suitable photographic subjects were concerned, I was suddenly confronted by two architectural anomalies that were more than camera-worthy in my eyes.



The Gann House is one of three related historic sites in Benton, with the other two being the Gann Building and the Gann Row Historic District. All three are named for Dr. Dewell Gann, Sr: an Atlanta-born surgeon who settled in Benton in 1888. Additionally, they are all listed on the National Register of Historic Places. When Benton received telephone service, he was assigned the phone number 2. Yes, 2.



The Gann House is a Queen Anne home that was constructed circa 1895. It was later passed down to Dr. Gann's son, Dewell Jr, who was chief of staff of St. Vincent Infirmary in Little Rock. The home was added to the National Register of Historic Places on January 2, 1976. The current owner is former Arkansas state senator Doyle Webb and his wife Barbara. According to the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, the Webbs

have kept the house accurate to the period while adding a 2,063-square-foot addition to the first floor of the house containing various modern amenities. (Berry)



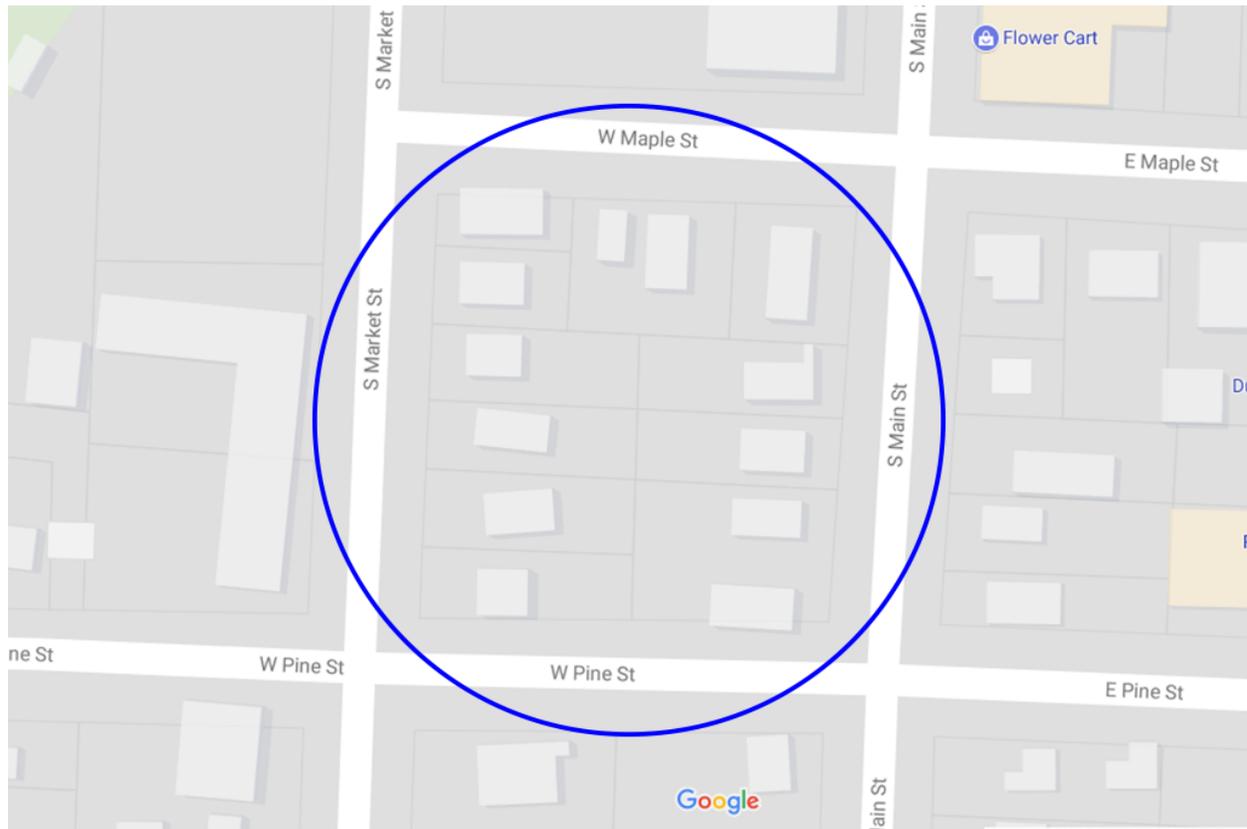
The Gann Building was built in 1893 and is the only known building in existence that is constructed of bauxite ore. Dr. Gann commissioned the building to serve as the office for his medical practice. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places on October 21, 1975 and has functioned as a museum since 1967. Temporary exhibits have covered the history of Benton and Saline County as well as subjects like World Wars I & II.

Skid Row Housing



The Gann Row Historic District is located a block down from the Gann House and the neighboring Gann Building in a residential area and consists of thirteen middle-class homes commissioned by Dr. Gann. He renovated four existing Folk Victorian homes with Craftsman details and built nine additional homes in the Craftsman style. Unfortunately, many of the homes are in a state of disrepair and in need of serious refurbishment.

For all my talk about nightlife, the other (or additional) concept I have for downtown Benton is to reinvent it in the vein of Mountain View, Arkansas. For those not in the know, this entails offering a variety of shopping, dining, and cultural experiences in one area. Yes, it's a bit touristy, but tourism is big business in Arkansas. In 2015 alone, the Arkansas tourism industry generated \$374 million in state tax revenue and \$137 million in local taxes. (Souza) How much of that is Benton receiving right now?



Since I'm throwing around the concept of eminent domain lightly (because it's never going to happen), it's an idea worthy of serious consideration where these homes are concerned. From what I've seen, I honestly don't believe the current occupants would mind moving if they were reasonably compensated. Not only can each home be restored and converted into a store front, but the collective backyard area of this block can be gutted and leveled into a communal space ideal for live entertainment and other events.

The way I see it, downtown Benton isn't getting any younger. By opening the neighborhood to increased hospitality and tourism, the funding necessary to maintain these great old buildings could increase exponentially. In talking to several of the locals, there is a shared passion for preserving this area for generations to come. Their unwavering dedication is certainly in place to take things to a new and exciting level.

The Long Walk Back



Okay, it wasn't that long of a walk, but I did ponder quite a bit about my surroundings over the course of those three blocks. More specifically, I indulged my ambitious fantasies for this neighborhood. Is it something that I personally will ever pursue to any degree? Absolutely not. Still, I have pursued some of my other ambitious fantasies over the years. As I walked back to my truck at the courthouse, it occurred to me that I've been using downtown Benton to practice more than just photography. I've also been using it to practice spotting potential in commercial property and brainstorming ideas to create something both culturally significant and profitable. Is this some unseen professional road I've been walking down all these years? Given my existing background in hospitality, it most likely is.

Once I reached my truck and repacked my camera gear, it was time to head home. Before I knew it, I was once again driving along an endless sea of chain department stores and fast food restaurants. Benton now has both a Petco and a Petsmart. While some people are surely impressed and perhaps view this newfound reality as some form of collective social status vindication, I could not care less.

Upon arriving home, I sat down at my computer and typed the line: "It was an unseasonably warm November afternoon."

Resources

Berry, Cody Lynn. "Gann House". *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=12173>. Accessed 15 April 2018.

Souza, Kim. "Arkansas' Tourism Revenue Grows 7.7% in 2015, Trending Higher in 2016". *Talk Business & Politics*. <https://talkbusiness.net/2016/03/arkansas-tourism-revenue-grows-7-7-in-2015-trending-higher-in-2016>. Accessed 15 April 2018.