



Jacksonport State Park, Jacksonport, Arkansas

# History<sup>of</sup> Jacksonport State Park

1961-1981

JACKSONPORT,  
ARKANSAS

*Cover images: Jacksonport Courthouse, June 2002  
and background image: Jacksonport Platte Map, original 1872*

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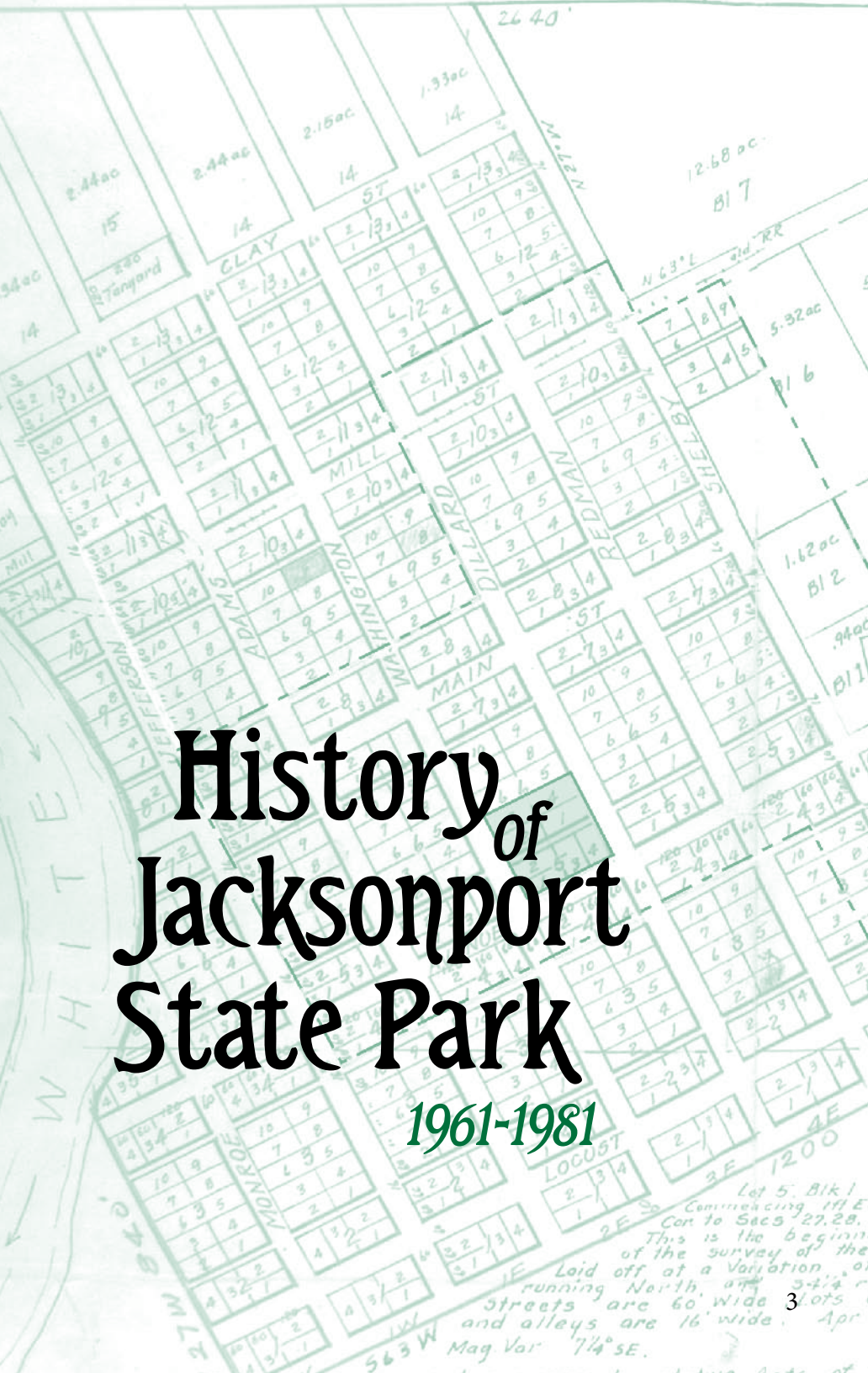
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*Jacksonport State Park would like to thank the Jackson County Historical  
Society for their assistance in producing this publication.*

*Notice: To preserve scenic beauty and the ecology, fences, and warning signs  
have not been installed in some park locations. Caution and supervision  
of your children are required while visiting these areas.*



# History of Jacksonport State Park

1961-1981

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*Above: Jacksonport  
Courthouse before  
restoration, circa 1961*

*Below: Lady Elizabeth  
Luker, circa 1965*



## Formation of the Jackson County Historical Society

On the evening of November 31, 1961 a group of like-minded Jackson County citizens made history. The diverse gathering formed the Jackson County Historical Society and met for the first time in the Billingsly Memorial Library in Newport. The society's mission was simple: To record the history of Jackson County, Arkansas in an orderly manner.<sup>1</sup>

Guest speaker Dr. John Ferguson, the Executive Secretary of the Arkansas History Commission, instructed the members to search for the truth in history across a wide variety of disciplines, to be objective, and to welcome members from all areas and walks of life. He also recommended possible projects for the society to begin, such as historical markers, publications, and museums. Little did the young society know how quickly they would be involved in all of these projects.<sup>2</sup>

## Saving the Courthouse

During the Society's second meeting on January 12, 1962, Society President Lady Elizabeth Luker announced a "bombshell" piece of news: The old Jackson County Courthouse, then in

private hands, was scheduled for destruction. This once prominent structure in Jacksonport was completed in 1872 when the town was the county seat. For twenty years it was the center of justice as the nearby river port flourished. However, as nearby Newport rose in prominence, Jacksonport declined and the county seat moved in 1892.



*Above: damaged Courthouse doorway and transom*

Since that time the building served as a school, cotton gin, county poor house, and grain storage. The building had undergone serious decline and was abandoned. The owners were willing to sell it for \$1,900. This sum was a daunting figure for the society, whose dues ranged from only \$3 to \$50. Even Ms. Luker voiced her doubts: "That's a lot of money for an organization as young as we are to raise... There may be nothing we can do to save the old building."<sup>3</sup>

*Below: County Home room partitions in Courtroom*

Within weeks the project grew. A fund was established to purchase the building and renovate it





*Above: Damaged  
Courthouse doorway*

into a county historical center. The goal was to raise \$7,000, which the Society hoped to raise through the donations of Jacksonport natives and other interested parties. Their plan also included a home for the property's eventual caretakers.<sup>4</sup>

At a Kiwanis Club meeting in February 1962, Ms. Luker praised the location of the courthouse as a tourist destination and promoted the project as a source of civic pride. According to her, "This [was] a now or never chance, we cannot preserve what is already torn down."<sup>5</sup>

The Society agreed, and unanimously voted to save "an outstanding historical landmark of the state, and for use as a future museum for Jackson County."<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the clock was ticking.

*Below: Courthouse window  
before restoration*



As of February 1, the Society had 60 days in which to raise the necessary funds.<sup>7</sup> Their subsequent funding drives called upon the civic pride and patriotism of local citizens.<sup>8</sup> Individuals from around the country sent contributions in response. Donors included former Jackson County natives and various individuals interested in the project itself. The society's

financial committee reported in April that \$6,186.53 had been raised for the project since it began in mid-January.<sup>9</sup> Donations ranged from a schoolboy's gift of eight cents to a \$500 matching contribution from a Washington D.C. resident.<sup>10</sup> Further restoration projects were funded through Jackson County bridge tournaments and other successful events.<sup>11</sup> In May of 1962, the Jackson County Historical Society acquired the deed to the courthouse property.

## A Growing Collection

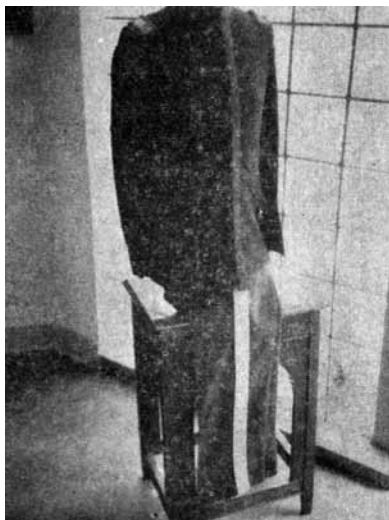
The Society's membership grew in proportion to the interest inspired by the project. From 64 members in late January 1962, the number swelled to 232 by its second regular meeting in April. In time, several hundred more individuals and businesses joined the blossoming organization.

In addition to financial and membership contributions, local citizens donated numerous artifacts for the foundation of a county museum. Spanish-American War uniforms, pioneer coverlets, and copies of Civil War flags each made their way into the Society's collection.<sup>12</sup> The Society's mission for a museum was made clear by



*Above: Clocks, plant stand, and platter donated to museum*

*Below: Spanish-American War uniform*



*Park Superintendent Lairs Miller and his wife Addie*



*Courthouse hallway before restoration*



Luker: “The old courthouse has served the county in many ways through the years since its doors first opened...It will appropriately present a visual history of life and development in the country as a museum for the future. It will be the direct accomplishment of the people in Jackson County, including former residents, to make this possible.”<sup>13</sup>

## Courthouse Caretakers

Jacksonport resident Lairs Miller and his wife Addie volunteered to become the courthouse caretakers. They moved into a newly renovated four-room home on the park grounds donated by the Southern Cotton Oil Company.<sup>14</sup> The City Council of Jacksonport offered to pay for the renovation of the courthouse vault for use as their meeting chamber as well as maintaining the grounds.<sup>15</sup>

## Restoration Begins

Renovation of the courthouse was no easy task. The interior was in very poor shape: windows were missing or broken, floors were rotten, and the roof leaked. The Society agreed that the first priority after purchasing the building was to close the windows and repair the roof. Later improvements would





be made gradually, and any unused areas would be sealed off for future phases of restoration.

*Courtroom after  
restoration, 1960s*

In time, workers cleared the basement of debris, removed the poor house room partitions from the courtroom, repaired the roof and windowsills, repaired the plaster, and painted the walls. Donors who wished to provide memorials for their families funded doorways and windows.<sup>16</sup>

Not all of the furnishings for the courthouse were new. Salvaged portions of demolished Jackson County structures appeared in their more fortunate counterpart. A chandelier and doors from the Old Walnut Street School, a 17' black

walnut baluster from the E.L. Watson home, and a carved stairway from the McHugh home each added to the renovations.<sup>17-19</sup> Miraculously, four sets of original courthouse locks, plates, and handles were returned to the courthouse and re-installed on the ground-floor exterior entrances.<sup>20</sup>

### Establishing a State Park

As renovations for the building progressed, the courthouse project gained statewide attention. In January of 1963, Jackson County State Representative Lonnie Etheridge introduced a bill which would make the courthouse a state park. State Senator Robert Harvey also supported the bill. On March 29, 1963 the Arkansas Senate approved the bill. In conjunction with this decision, the road from Jacksonport to Newport was designated as a state highway. According to Rep. Etheridge, “The support which the society’s campaign received were big factors in convincing the Legislature of the building’s importance as a historical landmark” and, “The designation as a state park will probably make the courthouse more attractive as a historical museum for tourists.”<sup>21</sup>



*Restored Jacksonport  
Courthouse, circa 1968*



By January of 1964, land negotiations between the Historical Society and the State were underway to create Jacksonport State Park. The Historical Society acquired several pieces of property and began trading these for lots between the museum and the river.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Society created a “Committee of 100” to raise money to purchase the necessary remaining land for the creation of a park. Donors of \$100 received a special certificate as well as “pride in the knowledge that they have brought the State Park to Jackson County.”<sup>23</sup>

On May 13, 1964, the deed for 15 acres of land including the courthouse, a strip of land between the courthouse and the river, and 1,500 feet of river frontage was given to the state for use as a park.

*Lady Elizabeth Luker  
presents property deed to  
Governor Orval Faubus*



With the creation of the park under the direction of the Publicity and Parks Commission, \$10,000 was allocated for the completion of the courthouse restoration and the creation of a picnic area on the river bank.<sup>24</sup>



*Above: "Mid-Century" room*

*Below: Pioneer Room*



## Museum Development Continues

As work on the courthouse continued, each room showcased a different era of history, and other exhibits featured highlights of the collection. The Pioneer Room included an elaborate barn loom, kitchen utensils, and large cast-iron pots. The Mid-Century and Turn of the Century Rooms featured furnishings from the 19th

century. Native American projectile points and mounted animals appeared in the former vault room area, and the War Memorial Room held cases of



military uniforms and memorabilia. In the hallway large storefront display cases held dresses from the 1850s to the early 1900s. Other cases held tools, county family documents, medical implements, and photographs.

## **A State Park is Born**

On June 5, 1965, the culmination of four years of work was opened to the public. In a grand day-long dedication event, speeches and band performances were interspersed with historical re-enactments and buggy rides. Morning events focused on the dedication of two Civil War Centennial markers which commemorated the surrender at Jacksonport and the town's role during the Civil War. The afternoon program featured the dedication of Jacksonport State Park.

*Jacksonport State Park  
dedication ceremony, 1965*



## Souvenir Program

presenting

Glimpses and Highlights of the  
135 Years of Jackson County History

published by

The Jackson County Historical Society

in honor of

Observance of the Surrender  
of the Confederate Army of Northern Arkansas  
at Jacksonport, June 5, 1865

and the

Opening of the Jacksonport State Park

June 5, 1965

### Program Committee

May McDonald, Chairman

Mrs. John Purdy, Jr.  
Louise Robinson Phillips  
Darrell Fortune  
Mrs. Alcorn Minor, Jr.  
Mrs. James Graham  
Celestine Byrd Phillips

Mrs. Wayne Boyce

## Dedication

### Civil War Centennial Markers

In Observance

Of the Surrender of Confederate Army of North Arkansas,  
Jacksonport  
June 5, 1865

Sons of Confederate Veterans ..... Artillery Demonstration, Admirals  
Band, Naval Airbase, Memphis Concert  
Ralph Sink & Jas. Wallace ..... "Salute to the Colors"  
S. C. V. Units ..... Salute to Confederate Flag  
Bob Evans ..... Master of Ceremonies  
Introduction: Civil War Centennial  
Commission & Honored Guests  
Dr. John L. Ferguson ..... History of Surrender  
Judge Neill Bohlinger ..... Tribute  
Mrs. Charles Loewer, United ..... Wreath at Marker  
Daughters of Confederacy  
Mrs. Lady E. Luker, ..... Wreath at Marker  
Historical Society  
S. C. V. ..... Lower Confed. Flag to Half-Mast  
Bugler ..... "Taps"  
S. C. V.

Intermission: Barbecue, Cold Drinks; Tour Home Demonstration  
Rides; Band, "Five Beaux & A Belle"; Folk Songs, Hummer  
house.

### IN APPRECIATION

Gen. Chairman: Mrs. Lady E.  
Co-Chairman: Mrs. Mildred Minor

### Committees:

Souvenir Program: Mrs. Ralph McDonald, Chairman; James  
John Purdy, Claude Erwin, Jr., Mrs. James Graham, Mrs.  
A. F. Minor, Mrs. Wayne Boyce, Mrs. Lady Luker and Mrs.  
Medallions: P. K. Holmes, Chairman; Van Manning, Joe B.  
Design Medallions: Mrs. Mildred M. Gregory & Miss Carl  
Publicity: Mrs. Mildred Minor Gregory & Phillip McDonald  
Invitations  
Hostesses: Mrs. Clyde McDonald, Mrs. Reuben Harper, &  
Registration: Mrs. Ruby Rankin & Mrs. Lairs Miller  
Speaker Platform: Leonidas Mack & J. E. Wilmas  
Decorations Stages: Mrs. Lorene Wiland, Chr. and Ladies  
Flag Poles & Communications: Jerry Mollenston  
Booths & Tents: Willis Martin, Carl Cross, Frank Moore

## Dedication Jacksonport State Park at Courthouse Grounds

Admirals Band ..... Concert River Songs  
Bob Evans ..... Master of Ceremonies  
Introduction: State Officials,  
Commissioners of Ark. Publicity  
& Parks Commission, Guests  
Senator Bob Harvey ..... Welcome & Introduction Gov. Faubus  
Gov. Orval E. Faubus ..... Address  
S. C. V. ..... Lower Confederate Flag & Fold.  
Raise U. S. & Ark. Flags  
Buglers ..... "Salute to the Colors"  
Muzzle-Loading Association ..... Shooting Match on River Bank

### IN APPRECIATION

Scenes & Customs Booths: ..... Miss Carol Martin, Chr., Members  
Jackson Co. Home Demonstration Clubs  
Ticket Sellers: ..... Luther McCartney & Committee  
Barbecue: ..... Prepared by Members Newport Fire Dept.  
Disposal Cans: ..... Courtesy of Victor Metal Corp.  
Traffic: ..... City Police Chief, Tom Stroud; State Police  
Capt. Bill Walker; Johnny Moore  
Parking: ..... Mayor Paul Massey, Sheriff Ralph  
Henderson & Deputies  
Chairs: ..... Otis Dillinger  
Horses & Riders: ..... Wayne Collier, chr. Saddle Club of Jackson Co.  
Surreys: ..... Ark-La Village, Ark-La Gas Co.,  
J. N. Hout & A. F. Minor  
Buggy & Carts: ..... Holman Lindsey & Bob Gardner  
Buglers: ..... Ralph Sink & James Wallace  
Cooking Facilities & Flags: ..... Newport High School, Supt. John Mullins

*Civil War marker and  
Jacksonport State Park  
dedication programs*



*Dedication of the Civil War surrender marker, 1965*



*Confederate Monument dedication ceremony, November 10, 1973*

Notable guests in attendance included Governor Orval Faubus, State Senator Robert Harvey, and Dr. John Ferguson of the Arkansas History Commission. In addition to county residents, invitations were extended to members of the Arkansas General Assembly. Over 2,500 people attended the event, and the future of the park was bright.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Story Continues**

When Jacksonport State Park was created, renovations to the courtyard did not stop with the courthouse restoration. In 1966, a carriage house was built on the park grounds to display antique buggies and surries as well as provide a separate public restroom area. Two years later, a gazebo was added next to the courthouse. In September of 1971 the park



*Above: Courthouse Gazebo, circa 1960s*

*Below: Carriage House, circa 1960s*





*Flagpole ceremony, 1971*

received a new flagpole in front of the courthouse. It was donated in memory of Lady Elizabeth Luker's son Major Ronald O. Scharnberg who was killed in Vietnam earlier that year. His widow, Marilyn Scharnberg, placed a wreath at the base of the flagpole during the dedication ceremony.

The last additions commemorated Jacksonport's role in the Civil War: In 1973 the Confederate Monument was moved from the courthouse at Newport to the end of the courtyard opposite the courthouse museum. It was joined by a Civil War cannon six years later.

*Mary Woods No. 2  
before restoration, 1967*

In 1967 the Potlatch Lumber Company donated the Mary Woods No. 2, a sternwheel steamboat, to the park. This 1931



logging boat underwent major renovations and was transformed into a 19th century passenger steamboat. In 1976 it opened as



a floating museum. Exhibits on board featured a poker table, antique furniture, and cabins furnished with historic clothing and accessories. For approximately 30 years the Mary Woods No. 2 helped tell the story of steamboating on the White River. Unfortunately she sank on January 31, 2010. The boat's wood superstructure was damaged so severely that it was too costly to restore and the Mary Woods' steel hull, drive train and engines were salvaged and sold.



*Mary Woods No. 2  
after restoration*

The park continued to grow when on December 29, 1973 the park acquired 67.34 acres from the J. Wilmans Corporation. The property was donated in memory of Mary Alice Wilmans, wife of Jimmy E. Wilmans. This property addition allowed Arkansas State Parks to begin work on funding, designing, and constructing a 20-site campground with a bathhouse, a pavilion, and a public area with restrooms. The completed facilities opened to the public on August 28, 1981. U.S. Senator Dale Bumpers was the keynote speaker at the dedication ceremony.



*Above: Campground, circa 1980*

*Below: Boat launch ramp*





*First Park Superintendent  
Lairs Miller*

From the beginning of Jacksonport State Park in 1965, every improvement occurred under the supervision of Park Superintendent Lairs Miller. When he passed away in December of 1981, the legacy he left was very clear. From the courthouse restoration to the Mary Woods No. 2 to the Wilmans land acquisition and improvements, each project mirrored his dedication to the park and an ongoing tradition of excellence.

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