

Downtown WEST MONROE Revitalization Group

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Downtown West Monroe Revitalization

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the Cotton Port Historic District.

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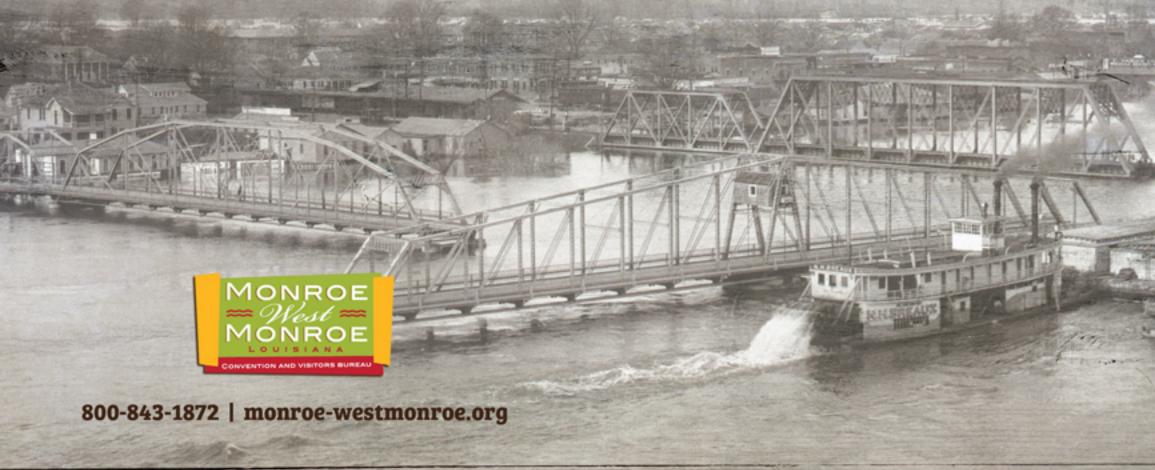
HISTORIC

Cotton Port

COME WALK WITH US



Downtown West Monroe, LA



2-10-32 GRIFFIN

HISTORIC

Cotton Port

In the mid-1800s, the small settlement of Cotton Port on the west side of the Ouachita River numbered only about 100 people. The arrival of the railroad in 1882 transformed this small community into a bustling town, as it became the main point for shipping cotton and livestock from farms on the west side of the river. Some merchants and tradesmen from nearby Trenton, located a little over a mile upriver, moved their businesses to Cotton Port to be close to the railroad. Easy access to the railroad also attracted industry. Within a few years, Cotton Port had a planing mill, a cottonseed oil mill, and an ice factory.

In 1884, the town changed its name from Cotton Port to West Monroe. In the early years, most of the businesses faced Commerce Street and the railroad tracks that ran along the riverfront, but the center of the downtown area gradually shifted to the intersection of Trenton and Natchitoches Streets. The town grew rapidly in the first half of the 20th century, and many of the buildings in the historic downtown were constructed between 1900 and 1950. By the 1950s, West Monroe had a thriving commercial district that included department stores, movie theaters, soda fountains, restaurants, banks, rooming houses, and drug stores.



TOUR SITES

- 1 | Railroad Bridge
- 2 | Exchange Cafe
- 3 | Seawall
- 4 | Railroad Spur & Cotton Yard
- 5 | The Exchange
- 6 | Ouachita Nehi Bottling Company
- 7 | Frank Varino Company, Inc.
- 8 | Millsaps Brothers General Store
- 9 | West Monroe Hardware & Furniture Company
- 10 | W.R. Mitchell General Store
- 11 | Tidwell-Larche Department Store
- 12 | Webb Hotel
- 13 | Masonic Lodge Building
- 14 | The Rialto
- 15 | Crystal Theatre & W.J. Mills Grocery
- 16 | Bell Tower & First City Hall 17+Union Oil Mill

- 18 | Stevenson-Johnson Cleaners & African American Homes
- 19 | 401-405 Natchitoches Street
- 20 | Second City Hall
- 21 | DeLoach Quality Cleaners
- 22 | First Methodist Church
- 23 | The Strand
- 24 | First National Bank of West Monroe
- 25 | West Monroe State Bank & Hatchell's Department Store
- 26 | Carolina Hotel
- 27 | City Drug Company & Trenton Street Bar

NEARBY SITES

- 28 | Meat & Fish Market
- 29 | Planing Mill & Ice Factory
- 30 | Lumber Yard
- 31 | J.H. & Etta Watkins House





1 | RAILROAD BRIDGE

In 1882, the Vicksburg, Shreveport, & Texas Railroad constructed a rail bridge across the Ouachita River. The railroad, which was completed to Monroe before the Civil War, connected West Monroe with the Mississippi River port of Vicksburg to the east. The depot stood approximately one block from the river.

2 EXCHANGE CAFÉ

101 WOOD STREET

The Exchange Café, a restaurant and bar operated by Delia (Harris) Myles, opened on this site in the 1920s, and remained in operation until about 1957. The present building was constructed around 1950. The café, as well as the barber shop that was located here in the 1920s and 1930s, were among the many West Monroe businesses operated by African Americans during the era of racial segregation. From the late 1800s until the 1960s, segregation laws and local custom forbade African Americans from operating businesses along the main downtown streets. As a result, they located their businesses on the edges of downtown or within African American neighborhoods.



3 | SEAWALL

In the winter of 1932, West Monroe experienced one of the worst floods in its history. Large areas of the city were evacuated as water filled streets and homes. In the aftermath of the flood, Mayor C.C. Bell and former state senator T.L. Hood worked to secure adequate and lasting flood protection for the city. As a result of their efforts, the federal government funded the construction of the concrete seawall along Trenton Street, as well as a levee to the south of the city. The mural on the seawall features designs by local schoolchildren, and was completed in 2015.



4 | RAILROAD SPUR & COTTON YARD

This segment of track follows the route of a spur line from the main rail line to businesses and industries along the Ouachita River. In the late 1800s, the tracks continued across Wood Street to a cotton yard established by John E. Morris. At the cotton yard, Morris weighed and stored farmers' cotton before shipping it by rail. The cotton yard closed not long after Morris's death in 1914.



111-113 COMMERCE STREET

Godwin C. "Doc" Moore opened a barber shop and the Exchange Saloon in this building in 1909. Metal letters set in the concrete in front of the building mark the location of the saloon. After the sale of alcoholic beverages was outlawed in 1920, Moore's son George converted the saloon into a pool hall. In the 1930s, the second floor of the building was part of the Carolina Hotel (Site #26).

6 | QUACHITA NEHI BOTTLING COMPANY

126 COMMERCE STREET

Wholesale grocers Frank Varino Company, Inc. constructed this building in 1920-1921 as a refrigerated warehouse. By 1927, the Ouachita Nehi Bottling Company had a bottling plant here. Using syrups shipped from Nehi headquarters in Georgia and local sugar, the company produced Nehi sodas and Royal Crown Cola. In 1938, the plant could produce 24,000 bottles per day. The bottling plant moved to a new location in West Monroe in 1945, but a "Nehi Bottling Co." mural remains on the side of the building.



7 FRANK VARINO COMPANY, INC.

200 COMMERCE STREET

Frank Varino Company, Inc. constructed this building in the late 1920s to house its growing wholesale grocery business. Groceries and tobacco products were unloaded from rail cars on the spur line that passed directly in front of the loading platform at the front of the building. Trucks then distributed the products to grocery stores and restaurants within a 50-100 mile radius of West Monroe. Frank Varino was born in Italy and moved to Louisiana in 1904 with his wife, Mary. Their sons carried on the business, but moved the company's offices to the former Webb Hotel (Site #12) after their father's death in 1953.



B | MILLSAPS BROTHERS GENERAL STORE

CORNER OF COMMERCE AND NATCHITOCHES STREETS

Like several other Trenton merchants, Uriah Millsaps believed that business would follow the railroad. As a result, in 1885, he moved his general store from Trenton to West Monroe. His one-story shop at the corner of Commerce and Natchitoches was the first brick commercial building in West Monroe. By 1890, Millsaps had added the two-story building next door, which later functioned as a warehouse for his store. The company remained in business in West Monroe for more than fifty years.







12 | WEBB HOTEL

318 TRENTON STREET

When it was constructed in the first decade of the 20th century, this building stood three stories tall, and had a second-story front porch. The rusticated stone blocks and arched openings are typical of the Romanesque Revival style. It is the only example of this style in downtown West Monroe. From the early 1900s until his death in 1914, William J. Webb operated a restaurant on the first floor and provided lodging on the second and third floors. Rooms in the upper stories were available for rent through the 1950s. In the late 20th century, the second floor was converted for use as a bed and breakfast. After closing briefly, it re-opened in 2011 as the Hamilton House Bed and Breakfast.

13 | MASONIC LODGE BUILDING

317 TRENTON STREET

In 1926, Freemasons in West Monroe organized Lodge #419 of the Free and Accepted Masons. In 1949, the lodge erected this building, which has a retail space on the first floor and lodge rooms on the second floor. The entrance to the second-floor lodge is at the back of the building, which has a nearly identical facade. Other organizations such as the Order of the Eastern Star, the Order of DeMolay (a youth organization), and the Royal-Arch Masons also used the lodge's meeting room.



14 | THE RIALTO THEATRE

318 TRENTON STREET

Roland Siegle opened a movie theater in this building in 1930, but closed the theater in 1932 and went bankrupt the following year. The 450-seat theater re-opened in 1934 as the Rialto, and later became part of a small chain of movie theaters operated by West Monroe resident Joseph M. Heard. Like other movie theaters in Louisiana, the Rialto was racially segregated until the mid-1960s. Only whites were permitted to enter through the main lobby and sit in the seats on the main floor of the theater. African Americans were required to enter via the side door that led directly to the balcony. The ticket booth, which remains inside the building, has separate windows for the main lobby and the side stair to the balcony.

15 | CRYSTAL THEATRE & W.J. MILLS GROCERY

323 TRENTON STREET

In the 1920s, this building was the home of the Crystal Theater, the first movie theater in West Monroe. After a fire gutted the movie theater in 1928, W.J. Mills remodeled the building as the new location for his grocery store, which had been in operation since before 1910. The Coca-Cola mural on the Pine Street side of the building was likely painted when L.C. Leake operated a grocery store here. The mural features Sprite Boy, a character that appeared in Coca-Cola advertising in the 1940s and 1950s.



17 | UNION OIL MILL

400 TRENTON STREET

This building was constructed in 1884 as Building No. 1 of Lemuel D. McLain's cottonseed oil mill. Originally one story, it was raised to two stories in 1926.

Known for most of its history as the Union Oil Mill, the factory became one of the largest cottonseed mills in the state. At its height, it occupied more than two city blocks and employed around 100 people for eight or nine months of the year, operating around the clock. In addition to cottonseed oil, the Union Oil Mill manufactured feed, fertilizer, and other products made from by-products of the cottonseed oil production process. In Building No. 1, the linters (short fibers surrounding the cottonseed) were processed for use in stuffing, explosives, and textiles such as rayon.



18 | STEVENSON-JOHNSON CLEANERS & AFRICAN-AMERICAN HOMES

CORNER OF COTTON AND PINE STREET

In the early 1890s, several houses rented by African Americans were located on this site at the corner of Cotton and Pine Street. African Americans continued to live here until the mid-20th century, even as many blacks settled in neighborhoods to the southwest and north of downtown. Residents Robert and Ollie Stevenson opened a cleaners on Cotton Street in the early 1930s. Lemmie Johnson took over the cleaning business in the mid-1930s, and ran it until the late 1940s or early 1950s, when the buildings in this area were demolished.

16 | BELL TOWER & SITE OF FIRST CITY HALL

CORNER OF TRENTON AND PINE STREETS

This brick tower shelters the original bell from West Monroe's first city hall, which was built on this site in 1907. The jail and the fire department were located on the first floor of the building, while a large council chamber occupied much of the second floor. The brick building was designed in the Chateauesque style by William Drago, who was born in nearby Trenton in 1870. Drago had no formal education in architecture, but went on to design numerous buildings in Louisiana and Mississippi and had offices in Monroe and New Orleans. In 1949, the municipal government moved to a new building at 413 Natchitoches Street (Site #20). The 1907 city hall was destroyed by fire in 1964.

19 | 401-405 NATCHITOCHES STREET

This brick building was constructed in the 1920s, a few years after Natchitoches Street was paved. The corner storefront, which initially housed a grocery store, served as the city's post office from 1938 to 1948. Morrison & Heacock Garage was located in the center section of the building, and the West Side Printing Company occupied the west storefront. The West Side Printing Company published the Ouachita Citizen, which has been West Monroe's newspaper since 1924.





20 | SECOND CITY HALL

413 NATCHITOCHES STREET

This three-story building was West Monroe's second city hall, built to replace the cramped and aging city hall at the corner of Trenton and Pine Streets (Site #16). When the first city hall was built in 1907, it served approximately 1,000 residents. By the time the second city hall was completed in 1949, the local government was responsible for a population of nearly 10,000. Designed by Monroe architects Smith, Padgett and Stubbs, the building housed offices on the first and second floors, while the jail was located on the third floor.

21 | DELOACH QUALITY CLEANERS

103 CYPRESS STREET

Built as a gas station in 1930, this building became a dry cleaning plant in the mid-1930s. Buddy and Agnes DeLoach operated a dry cleaning business here from 1942 until 1973. The large, industrial windows on the side of the building and the roof monitor recall its former life as a gas station and dry cleaning plant. In 2008, it was converted into offices.



22 | FIRST METHODIST CHURCH

101 NORTH 2ND STREET

The Methodist congregation in Trenton moved to this site on North 2nd Street in 1886, and constructed this brick church in 1920 to replace an earlier frame building. Described as "palatial" in local newspapers at the time, the imposing two-story building is constructed in the Colonial Revival style. The interior of the sanctuary features paneled wainscoting and a balcony. The First Methodist Church is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



23 | STRAND

111 COTTON STREET

When Captain H.M. Williams and Timothy Newell, the former owner of the Crystal Theater (Site #15), opened the Happy Hour Theater in this building in 1929, it was the first movie theater in West Monroe to show motion pictures with sound. In 1932, the theater was re-named The Strand and joined Joseph M. Heard's chain of movie theaters. Originally built with 195 seats, the theater expanded in the 1940s to seat over 500 moviegoers.

24 | FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF WEST MONROE

311 NATCHITOCHES STREET

Local contractor Jesse Heard built this building in 1953 for the newly formed First National Bank of West Monroe. The building is an excellent example of mid-20th-century modern architecture, and newspaper announcements of the grand opening in May 1953 highlighted the modern automatic



doors and air conditioning. The First National Bank prospered, and just six years later, it moved to a new, larger building a few blocks away. The Ouachita Federal Savings & Loan Association occupied the building from 1959 to 1975.





25 | WEST MONROE STATE BANK & HATCHELL'S DEPARTMENT STORE

229-233 TRENTON STREET 8 307 NATCHITOCHES STREETS

This large corner building was a landmark in West Monroe's commercial district for much of the 20th century. The building was constructed in 1904 for Green B. Haynes, who moved to West Monroe in the late 1880s and established a general store. In the 1910s, the building was divided to house several businesses. The West Monroe State Bank occupied the corner location from 1919 until the bank failed in 1936, in the midst of the Great Depression.

In 1937, the Hatchell brothers, who operated several general stores in north Louisiana, remodeled the old Haynes building and opened a department store. The 13,500-square-foot Hatchell's Department Store stretched nearly a whole block on Natchitoches Street, and claimed to have one of the largest glass window displays in northeast Louisiana. In addition to a wide selection of ready-made clothing, work clothes, fabrics, kitchen supplies, and linens, Hatchell's included a food market at the Cotton Street end of the building.



26 | CAROLINA HOTEL

210 TRENTON STREET

Starting in the mid-1930s, the Carolina occupied the second floor of this building, as well as the second floor of the building behind it (Site #5). In its first twenty years, the hotel typically rented rooms to young couples and unmarried workers, and charged weekly rates of two or three dollars. The Carolina Hotel closed in the 1960s.

27 | CITY DRUG COMPANY & TRENTON STREET BAR

205-207 TRENTON STREET

Built between 1909 and 1913, this building has two well-preserved storefronts with pressed tin ceilings above the entrances. The first tenant of 205 Trenton Street was the City Drug Company. In 1923, Henry Jarrell and George Sanford purchased the City Drug Company, and their names remain in the tile flooring in front of the entrance. In addition to filling prescriptions and selling medicines and health-related products, Jarrell and Sanford operated a soda fountain. The adjacent building at 207 Trenton Street housed various stores until 1933, when Thomas Painich opened a bar shortly after Prohibition ended and the sale of alcoholic beverages became legal again. The Painich family continued to operate the bar through the 1970s.



28 | MEAT & FISH MARKET

113 SOUTH RIVERFRONT STREET

Built in 1921, this building was a meat or fish market for more than fifty years. In 1925, the proprietor, Pike Neal, got into a fight with a local hotel owner over unpaid debts, leading to a stand-off with police that drew a crowd large enough to block traffic on the bridge. Homer Anderson ran the fish market from the late 1930s until the mid-1940s, when Albert J. Bayles took over the business. Bayles Fish Market remained in operation through the 1970s.

29 | PLANING MILL & ICE FACTORY

101 MILL STREET

In the late 19th and early 20th century, this was the site of a planing mill associated with the Ouachita Manufacturing Company, which produced window sashes, doors, and wooden blinds. An ice factory was located here from about 1905 until 1958, when the widespread availability of electric refrigerators drove it out of business. In 1972, Tyner-Petrus Hardware, which has been in business in West Monroe since 1928, moved its store to this location.

30 | LUMBER YARD

520 TRENTON STREET

Sawmills were among the earliest industries in West Monroe. Fred Vollman established the Ouachita Excelsior Steam Saw and Planing Mill on this site in Cotton Port in the early 1880s, and his mill supplied wooden ties for the construction of the railroad. The Ouachita Excelsior was succeeded by the Ouachita Lumber Company, which closed after a fire destroyed its largest sawmill in 1909. The West Side Lumber Company rebuilt the mill but dismantled it in 1921 following another fire. The present building was constructed for the Union Oil Company (Site #17), which expanded onto the property after the sawmill closed.



31 | J.H. & ETTA WATKINS HOUSE

106 NORTH 3RO STREET

With its decorative scroll-sawn brackets and asymmetrical façade, this house is an excellent example of early 20th-century residential architecture in West Monroe. John H. and Etta (McFadden) Watkins moved into this house in the 1910s. Through his position with the Ouachita Valley Farm Loan Association, J.H. Watkins worked to secure loans for local farmers during the 1920s and 1930s, and helped found the Louisiana Cotton Growers' Co-operative Marketing Association. He served two terms on the West Monroe City Council and made unsuccessful runs for mayor and state representative. Etta Watkins was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union and worked to establish night schools for adults in the 1930s.