

# Arkansas History

Arkansas is called “The Natural State” due to its abundant natural resources and beauty, but the state has long had much more going for it than just the land. The citizens of Arkansas have shown remarkable bravery in supporting causes important to them, even when this meant dispute, war and death.

Stories of Arkansas’ rich heritage featured along the Texas Eagle route include tales of Native Americans, pioneers who built the state, Civil War battles, the oil boom, blues and mountain folk music, diamonds, nine students who helped forge the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, and a native son who rose to the U.S. presidency. Come along as we discover the heritage of this deep southern frontier.

Indigenous people have lived on these lands for thousands of years. Only a couple of centuries ago did the land experience new visitors, the Europeans. After years of exploration and settlement, the region was organized as the Territory of Arkansas in 1819 and almost two decades later it was admitted to the Union as a state in 1836; becoming the 25th U.S. state and the 13th slave state.

Arkansas residents focused their energy on developing and protecting the resources within their borders, but they also came to their aid of their neighbors to the south. Arkansas played a key role in aiding Texas in its war for independence from Mexico by sending troops and materials to Texas. The city of Washington, Arkansas, located close to the Texas border, became heavily involved in the Texas Revolution during 1835 and 1836.

Arkansas again came to the aid of its neighboring states in 1846 when the Mexican-American War began. Washington became an unofficial headquarters for volunteer troops. Ten companies of men assembled here where they were formed into the first Regiment of Arkansas Cavalry.

When the Civil War began Arkansas was faced with a tough decision of whom to support. Arkansas first refused to join the Confederacy, but that changed when President Lincoln called for troops to respond to the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Arkansas was unwilling to fight against its neighbors and therefore seceded from the Union in 1861. The state never served as a major battleground during the war, but it was the site of numerous small-scale battles. Arguably the most well-known native of Arkansas during the Civil War was Confederate Major General Patrick Cleburne. Cleburne is considered by many to be one of the most brilliant Confederate commanders of the war and has been nicknamed "The Stonewall of the West."

When the Civil War was over, Congress readmitted Arkansas and the state began to truly write its own history. African-American freedmen immediately began to participate in state politics; bringing a new, robust dynamic to political life. From 1869 to 1893, more than 45 African-American men were elected to seats in the state legislature. Along with a range of important legislation enacted during this time period, one bill stands out as being rather unusual. A controversy had raged over the correct way to pronounce the state’s name, and this was settled by adoption of an official pronunciation.

The open political environment in Arkansas did not last long. In the 1890s, doors began closing again for African-Americans in the state. State legislators passed a law requiring a literacy test

for voter registration, despite the fact that 25% of the population could not read or write. The state also passed an amendment that imposed a poll tax and associated residency requirements for voting. The

combined barriers sharply reduced the numbers of blacks and poor whites able to vote, and in turn, voter participation dropped sharply. Due to this manipulation, whites reigned superior in the state's political realm once again. African-Americans and poor whites made up one-third of the state's population, but were shut out of the political process. Therefore, thousands left and moved north toward a hopeful, better quality of life.

Arkansas' extreme mistreatment towards African-Americans was brought to national attention in the Little Rock Nine incident of 1957. The issue centered on Little Rock Central High School and the community's harsh refusal to desegregate. Today, over 50 years later, Arkansas is a much different place. Changed racial attitudes and growth in jobs created a migration of African-Americans back to the state.

### **Source(s):**

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