

Blacksmith Shops



Blacksmiths played an essential role in every community before the arrival of the automobile, using their skills to create and repair many items that were necessities in that earlier time—items like nails, horseshoes, wagon wheels, farm implements, weapons, and chains. But, the day of the blacksmith has passed, and individuals skilled with a hammer, anvil, and forge can be hard to find today. Well up into the early twentieth century horse-drawn vehicles remained the most common type of local transportation, and the blacksmith performed the tasks of shoeing animals and repairing those vehicles. But, with the advent of the automobile, blacksmith shops gradually disappeared.

Traditionally, the name “blacksmith” distinguished work with heavy metals such as iron and steel from that of a “whitesmith” or “tinsmith,” who worked with light metal; a “gunsmith,” who worked with guns; or a “goldsmith,” who worked with gold and other precious metals.

Blacksmith Adam Blakely established his business at what is now Arkadelphia in about 1810 and the enterprise existed as one of Clark County’s earliest businesses. The pioneer’s shop stood on the west bank of the Ouachita River, near where the highway bridge crosses the river.

A historical marker near Caddo and First streets describes the site. It reads: *At or near this site Adam Blakely operated a blacksmith shop from 1810. The settlement was called Blakelytown until 1838 when the name Arkadelphia was adopted. It became the Clark County seat in 1842. Until the railroad came in 1873, river transportation to points as far as New Orleans flourished. The wharf was on the south bank between the two present bridges. Prior to 1908, all vehicular river crossing was by ferry.*

Since Blakely opened the very first such business, Arkadelphia has enjoyed the services provided by numerous blacksmith shops through the years. The men performed services like shoeing horses, repairing wagon wheels, and sharpening plows. And, they also actually made horseshoes, wheels, and plows!

Blacksmith shops could usually be found near wagon yards and livery stables. A town and county seat the size of Arkadelphia generated enough business to support several such businesses. In fact, local historian Farrar Newberry recalled the existence of five or six blacksmithing enterprises in Arkadelphia during his boyhood in the early twentieth century.

Blacksmith shops also served as social centers and could be popular places for folks to congregate, especially for those who came to town from the outlying areas. People from farms and outside the more densely populated places usually traveled to town on Friday or Saturday to do their shopping and conduct business. While waiting on their items to be repaired by the blacksmith, they could visit with others there to catch up on the local news and gossip. Some even played games like checkers while waiting.

One place recalled by Newberry was Joe Miller’s shop (shown in photo), which faced east on Fifth, between Main and Crittenden. And at one time, the Duke family’s operation stood at the southeast corner of Seventh and Clay, but later moved to Fifth Street, between Crittenden and Crawford. John Duke’s business is believed to have been the last blacksmith shop to remain active inside Arkadelphia.