

Photo of the Month

Brick Streets



Streetscape of West Walnut Street looking west.
Rogers, Arkansas, late 1950s.
Neg. # 22372

“The brick streets add a little nostalgia and an air of elegance to the town,” Opal Beck once said. She was quoted on her reasons for justifying preservation of brick streets during the late 1980s in a July 26, 2004 retrospective article in *The Benton County Daily Record*. The brick streets that Opal Beck helped save from resurfacing were completed during 1924 in Rogers and we still enjoy the appearance of the streets as residents and the low cost of maintenance as tax payers. Pictured at right is a streetscape of downtown Rogers during the 1950s.

The first noted interest toward street improvement appeared in Rogers in 1910 as the city began considering the most appropriate paving methods for the community. Brick paving was expensive, but long lasting. The City of Fayetteville, a short time earlier, “macadamized” its downtown streets, which was less expensive than brick paving and involved laying down gravel coated with coal tar pitch or Tarvia on the road bed.

By 1919, the Rogers City Council proposed an ordinance providing for paving certain streets in the downtown area. The resulting Special Improvement District required the signatures of fifty-one percent of property owners in the district, based on assessed valuation of real estate, in order to pass. The council also formed a committee to further investigate the cost of paving in Fayetteville.

After several years of consideration and public debate, the Special Improvement District Ordinance passed in February 1924 to pave downtown with bricks. Opposition to the project focused on perceptions of unjust and inequitable property assessments as well as complicated and unclear contracting procedures. Nevertheless, the Kaw Paving Company of Topeka, Kansas won the contract and began work in July 1924.

The boundaries of the district included:

- Walnut Street from First Street to Fourth Street,
- First Street from Cherry Street to Walnut Street,
- Second Street from Walnut Street to Poplar Street,
- Elm Street between First Street and Second Street,
- and Poplar Street from First Street to Second Street.

The construction company set up an office in the old Vandover Building and began shipping in materials via the Frisco Railroad. Early in the project, telephone poles were moved from the streets to the sidewalks. As evident in newspaper articles of the time, many in the public perceived the new utility pole placement to be unattractive and believed that they should have been located in the alleys. Bricks, produced in Coffeyville, Kansas, were stacked along the streets as storm sewers were laid prior to grading the streets. Many of the streets became virtually impassable, or officially closed, as the construction mess tested the patience of local residents.



Examples of brick bonds in downtown Rogers streets.

Typical straight bond in streets, left.

Typical woven bond in intersections, right.

**Photographs taken at the intersection of South Second and Poplar Streets by
Rogers Historical Museum.**

Over a period of three months, construction crews poured five-inch deep concrete road beds. These beds were then covered with an inch of sand prior to laying three-inch thick vertical fiber bricks at the surface. The bottom picture at right illustrates the different types of brick bonds used in the street and in the intersections. After the bricks were laid, crews rolled the paving to settle the streets. The final step

involved covering the street with an asphalt preparation to fill cracks and joints, which would prevent the bricks from butting and chipping as well as create an even surface. By fall 1924, Kew Paving Company completed the paving work at a cost of approximately \$100,000. It is interesting to note that area residents didn't see the brick surface for some time after work was completed. The bricks finally appeared after several months of automobile traffic over the streets, which wore the top layer of asphalt away.

In October 1924, a Rogers Democrat article touted the benefits of the newly paved, mud free streets as being well worth the inconvenience and price. The article also highlighted the modern look of the downtown area with the newly installed traffic lights. They were described as similar to those in other cities, which featured red lights that only protruded several inches above the pavement.

These modern streets eased traffic burdens to a point that new regulations were needed to maintain order in downtown. The city council passed an ordinance in December 1924 with the following provisions:

- No parking was to be permitted on the east side of First Street between Cherry and Walnut Streets. It was cited that the street was narrow and congested.
- Cars were to be headed to the curb and parked at a forty-five degree angle. The city planned to mark parking lines shortly after the ordinance went into effect.
- No parking was to be permitted within twenty feet of a fire hydrant, no more than three people were allowed to ride on the front seat of a car, and no one was allowed to ride on the running boards or fenders of a car.
- Cars were to be headed into the curb to discharge passengers instead of stopping in the street.
- Nothing weighing more than five tons was to be transported over the paving without a permit from the mayor, who may also demand a cash indemnity bond.
- No truck or tractor was to be allowed on paved streets with mud or weed chains, cleats, lugs, spikes, or other hard materials that could cut the streets.
- Fines for violating these regulations were to amount to not less than \$1 or more than \$25 for each offense.

Following the paving work, the brick thoroughfares impressed many visitors to our community and presented the town as a modern place. The downtown streets are still paved with the original bricks and they seem to have the potential to last many more years. This illustrates quite well that they require little maintenance over long periods of time, while traditional paving methods often require maintenance every 10 to 15 years. Today these streets inspire nostalgia and community identity as Opal Beck argued during the 1980s. They are certainly an asset worth preserving.