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2021 SUMMER COAST MAGAZINE

**Oklahoma City to
Little Rock**
Exploring the South-Central
American Heartland

Wonderful Wheaton
Time to explore this Illinois city

SUMMER FUN

Cherry Valley Lakes Resort
Beaumont, California

Lake of the North
West Branch, Michigan

Millbrook Outdoor Resort
Jefferson, Ohio

Oklahoma City *to* Little Rock

Exploring the South-Central American Heartland





Oklahoma National Monument, Photo courtesy of Visit Oklahoma City.



Oklahoma City Memorial, one of the twin massive bronze-walled gates. Photo courtesy of Visit Oklahoma City.

OKLAHOMA CITY TO LITTLE ROCK

By Richard Varr

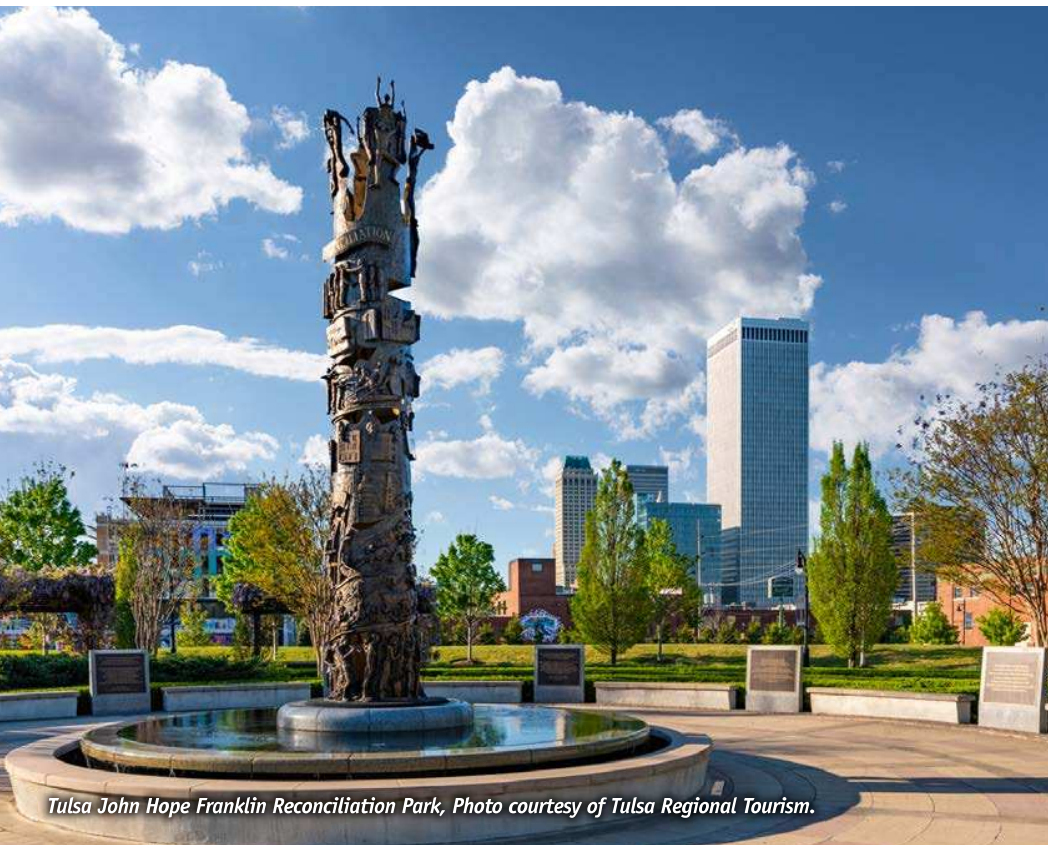
Time seemingly stands still for two minutes. Twin massive bronze-walled gates, one etched at 9:01 and the other at 9:03, flank a peaceful reflecting pool, its glassy waters aglow with a sheen from the morning sunlight. To one side sit 168 bronze chairs in orderly rows representing the victims of what happened here on the morning of April 19, 1995. And on the other side of the pool within a circular courtyard, the so-called Survivor Tree stands strong and still blooms 26 years after a horrific bomb blast tore and shredded its limbs.

My visit to the Oklahoma City National Memorial, often noted as the city's top-rated and must-see site, evoked a strong sense of sorrow—an awkward silence as I would describe it—similar to what I felt when seeing New York City's National September 11 Memorial & Museum and Pearl Harbor's *USS Arizona* Memorial in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Oklahoma City bombing was an act of domestic terrorism when a truck bomb exploded

outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building downtown, stripping walls from the nine-story structure leading to dramatic rescues of survivors still trapped inside.

The memorial's design helps tell the story of what happened on that fateful day. The two tall gates, the actual entrances to the memorial, are placed across the reflecting pool to symbolize the unsuspecting minute before the 9:02 a.m. blast, and moments afterward with the realization of how it has changed this city and the nation forever. The reflecting pool runs along what was 5th street, where the exploding truck was parked. The 168 empty chairs now occupy the site where the Murrah Federal Building once stood. The chairs are lined in nine rows, representing the building's nine floors. Each chair is the same, with tall bronze back supports and granite seats above opaque glass that illuminates with nightfall.

The memorial is one of the more poignant sites to see in a trail of history within America's south-central heartland while traveling from Oklahoma City to Tulsa and then crossing over to Arkansas' Fort Smith, Hot Springs and Little Rock. Stops along the way showcase national historic sites, monuments to civil rights struggles, museums, architecture, natural attractions, and even a presidential library that reveal not only the region's historical and cultural legacy, but momentous



Tulsa John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, Photo courtesy of Tulsa Regional Tourism.



Boston Avenue Methodist Church in Tulsa was built in ecclesiastical art deco style, Photo courtesy of Tulsa Regional Tourism.

events that have profoundly shaped American history.

Along with the shimmering geometric art deco architecture and meandering downtown tunnels, there's another component—albeit calamitous and tragic—of Tulsa's legacy. This year is the 100th anniversary of the Black Wall Street Massacre, also known as the Greenwood Massacre, where angry mobs fueled what some have called the single worst incident of racial violence in American history. It stemmed from rumors of a black teenage boy assaulting a white girl in an elevator and resulted in angry white mobs burning—with firebombs dropped from airplanes—and decimating a few dozen city blocks of what once was one of the wealthiest African American communities in the country. Up to 300 people were killed, with hundreds injured.

Today, John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park with its circular courtyards, water wall and statues pays tribute to the massacre's victims. Greenwood Rising, a new and long-awaited history center memorializing this tragedy, opened this anniversary year. Taking part in the new center's development was the same firm involved with the September 11 Memorial & Museum.

"This rich, cultural experience (of Greenwood Rising) vividly highlights the legacy of Black Wall Street and

the prominent African Americans who lived and worked here 100 years ago," says Ray Hoyt with Tulsa Regional Tourism. "The 1921 Race Massacre is likely Tulsa's most regrettable point in history. But it's history that needs to be shared, and we are encouraged by the way it's spreading across the world and sparking courageous conversations."

History buffs will also delight in the fact that historic Route 66 passes through downtown Tulsa, where there are many examples of the city's extensive art deco architecture resulting from the booming oil business a century ago. Zigzag and streamlined styles emblazon lobbies and facades of office towers including the Philcade Building financed by oilman Waite Phillips. Another stunning example—my favorite—is the Boston Avenue United Methodist Church built in ecclesiastical art deco style. Its soaring tower adds a distinctive touch to the city's skyline.

First built to provide security for the rich oil barons, Tulsa's downtown tunnel system later expanded and today connects office buildings with garages and hotels, also providing a great way to explore art deco lobbies. "Linked to big money from Tulsa's oil boom, the tunnels were created for Waite Phillips' safety to maneuver around Tulsa's downtown during the Great Depression



Fort Smith Visitor Center, Photo courtesy of Fort Smith CVB.



The interior of Fort Smith, Photo courtesy of Fort Smith CVB.



Fort Smith Trail of Tears Overlook, Photo courtesy of Fort Smith CVB.



The gallows at Fort Smith, Photo courtesy of Fort Smith CVB.

in a time when gangsters sought out the wealthy,” explains Hoyt.

From Tulsa, a two hour drive to just over the Arkansas border leads to the Fort Smith National Historic Site, the namesake of this military outpost founded in 1817. With 19th century artifacts including weapons, tools and the court gavel used by the so-called “Hanging Judge,” the site showcases the location of the first fort that’s no longer standing, and the still existing fort’s use through the Civil War years and as a Federal Court from 1872 until 1896.

The outpost’s strategic location where the Arkansas and Poteau rivers converge became all the more important during the country’s sorrowful Trail of Tears march that forced Native American tribes to relocate from southern states to what’s now Oklahoma. “Fort Smith was built because of the Indian Removal Act of 1830,” explains park ranger Cody Faber, noting the so-called Trail of Tears Overlook. “Our (Trail of Tears) path is the river,” Faber continues. “Many of the tribes came up the Mississippi River and then traveled up the Arkansas instead of walking the entire length of the state of Arkansas.”

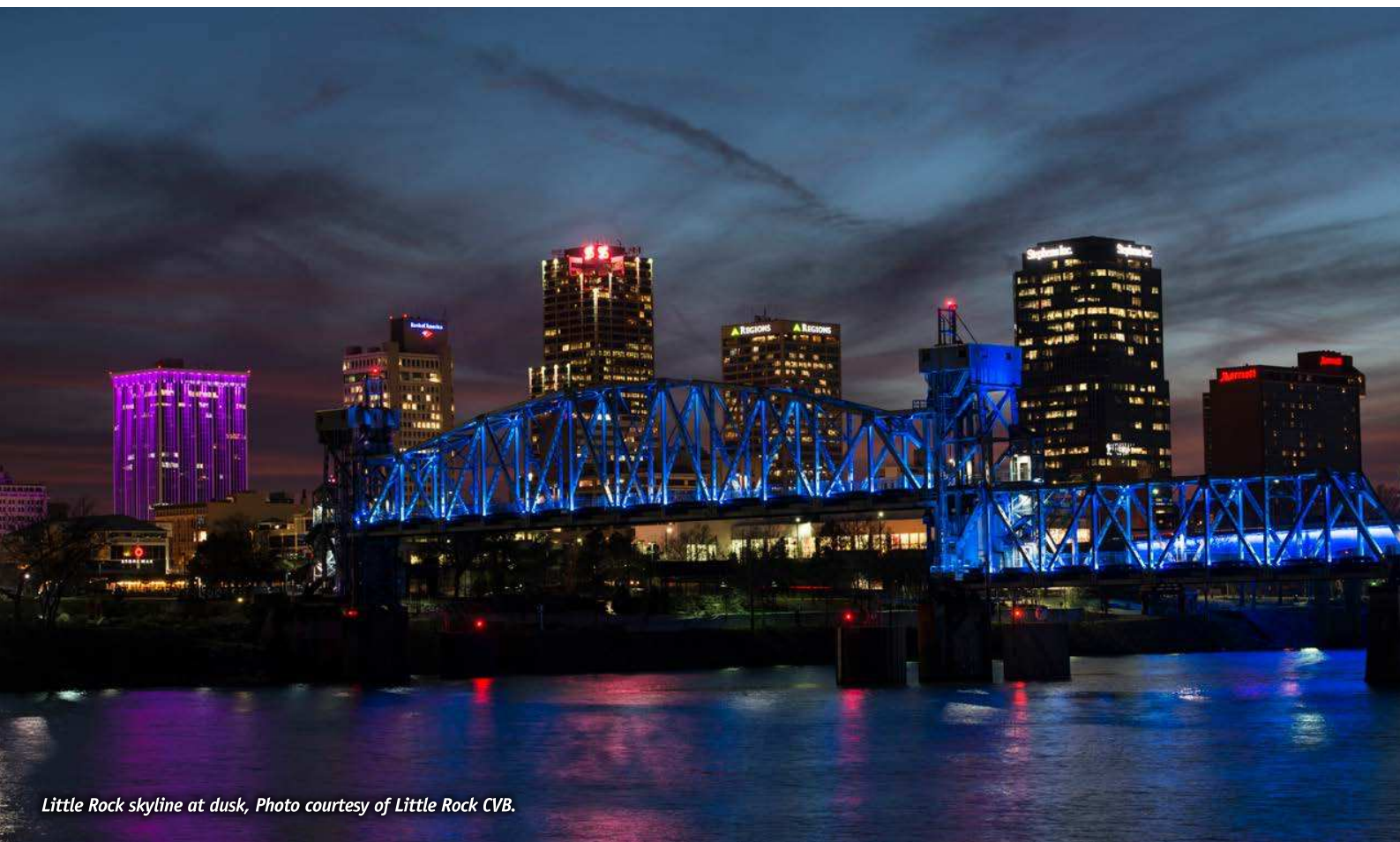
This historic site includes the Visitor Center and Museum, which was first used as soldiers’ barracks and

mess hall, and later included the courtroom and jail. The Commissary Building housed troops during the Civil War, and later court officials. Federal Judge Isaac Parker, the “Hanging Judge,” served from 1875 until 1889. Those sentenced swung from the gallows that remain on the site today.

“If you want to understand what’s taking place as a nation in the middle of the 19th century, Fort Smith is a great place to go look,” notes Faber. “It involves so many human stories, good and bad. You have the tragedy of the Trail of Tears, war, slavery, social upheaval, and people overcoming that.”

Rustic Hot Springs, a two-and-a-half hour drive southeast of Fort Smith, sits nestled within scenic mountainsides. I was surprised to learn this town was once a notorious hangout for early 20th century gangsters during Prohibition and was where Major League Baseball’s spring training got its start. Why here? “Water is the reason millions of people have come here for centuries,” points out Director of Marketing for Visit Hot Springs Bill Solleder.

The springs saturating the grounds have a constant flow of mineral-rich waters at an average 143 degrees Fahrenheit, formed from rainwater first seeping within



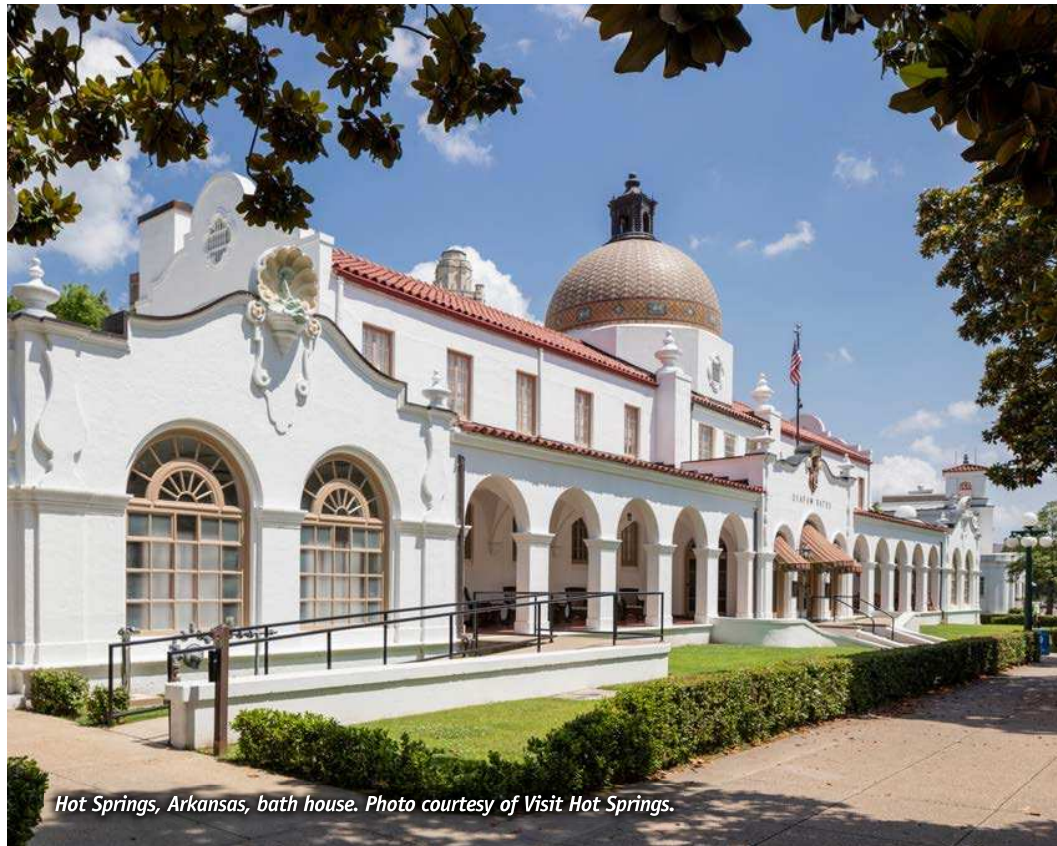
Little Rock skyline at dusk, Photo courtesy of Little Rock CVB.



Oklahoma City Memorial, A Moment in Time Illuminated Tour. Photo courtesy of Visit Oklahoma City.



Tunnels in Tulsa were built to provide security for the rich oil barons, Photo courtesy of Tulsa Regional Tourism.



Hot Springs, Arkansas, bath house. Photo courtesy of Visit Hot Springs.

the steep folds of the Quachita Mountains. Sinking deep into a recharge zone, down to 8,000 feet, water is then heated by the earth's crust. In fact, the journey down is astoundingly slow, penetrating the thick rock layers about a foot a year and thus taking 4,400 years to bubble back up through fissures in the rock layers. "That water that we drink and soak in today comes from the time when the Egyptians were building the pyramids," notes Solleder.

From the mid 1800s through the early 1900s, several bathhouses, some in splendid Gilded-age and mansion-style architecture, were built over the springs. Of the eight on Bathhouse Row, only two remain operational where visitors can soak in the rejuvenating thermal waters. The Buckstaff Bathhouse features original bathtubs from when it opened more than 100 years ago, and the grandiose white-façade, cupola-domed Quapaw Bathhouse is named after a local Native American tribe. The other six were closed down and now have other functions, for example, as a brewery, Bathhouse Row's gift shop and the town's visitor center.

Bathhouse Row today is within Hot Spring National Park, designated as such in 1921 because of the area's precious water resources, and thus celebrating its 100th anniversary. It's also the country's oldest park maintained

by the National Park Service, stretching some 5,000 acres over surrounding mountainous areas with 26 miles of hiking trails, shallow thermal water pools and spring water spigots for drinking and filling jugs. A 216-foot-tall observation tower atop Hot Springs Mountain offers vast views of the valley town and Quachita Mountains.

President Bill Clinton's Hot Springs childhood home, a whitewashed house in Tudor Revival architectural style, is now a private residence and not open to the public. An hour's drive east, however, offers a comprehensive look into his life and time in the White House at Little Rock's William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park along the Arkansas River.

Key to the center is the Presidential Library and Museum, an elongated steel and glass building jutting out over the riverbank. "The library was purposely done so to represent a bridge that President Clinton felt was symbolic of his bridging two centuries together," says Linda Howell, a local tour guide and owner of Haunted Tours of Little Rock. "Little Rock is very fortunate to have this very impressive building." Within the main exhibition hallways, large panels outline events during each year of the Clinton presidency along with replicas of his Oval Office and Cabinet Room. Video clips highlight snippets of his speeches, and photographs depict



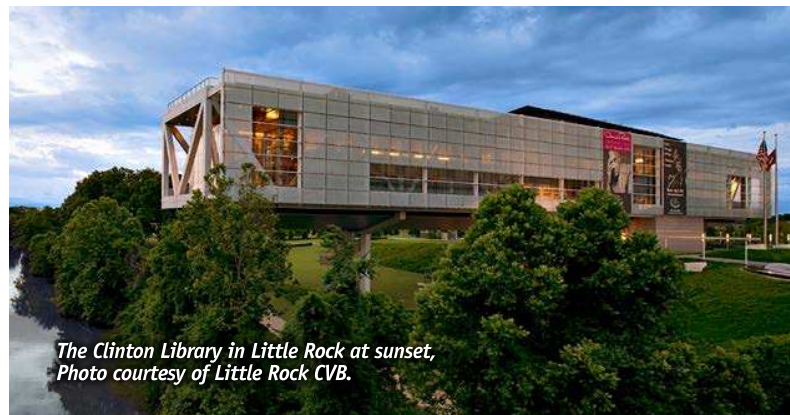
Little Rock Central High National Historic Site, Photo courtesy of Little Rock CVB.



Bronze sculptures of the Little Rock Nine are on the Capitol Grounds, Photo courtesy of Little Rock CVB.



The Broadway Bridge Riverfront Skyline Bridge in Little Rock, Photo courtesy of Little Rock CVB.



The Clinton Library in Little Rock at sunset, Photo courtesy of Little Rock CVB.

humorous moments. Clinton’s presidential limousine and his saxophones display are particularly popular.

Little Rock’s momentous civil rights battleground was Central High School, where nine terrified but brave African-American students in 1957—with federal troops escorting them—climbed the grand stairwell of the previously all white Central High School under court-ordered desegregation. Day after day, they stood up to harassing mobs hurling threats and spit. Today, the multi-level, earthen brick building is still a working high school and the only one on the grounds of a National Historic Site. A visitor center and museum across the street tell the story that made national headlines.

Bronze sculptures of the students, “Testament: The Little Rock Nine Monument,” stands on the grounds of the Arkansas Capitol. “They are purposely facing the governor’s office window so that each time a governor looks out, he will be reminded to do what is morally correct rather than politically expedient,” notes Howell.

One local attraction made movie history when North Little Rock’s Old Mill in T.R. Pugh Memorial Park appeared in opening scenes of the Civil War blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*. Built in 1933, the mill is a replica of a water-powered grist mill from the 1800s. “The landscape

is beautiful no matter the season,” says Howell. “It’s included on all of my public tours — it’s the last stop and the best.”

Little Rock’s MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History highlights the state’s military heritage and includes an exhibition on its namesake, Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The World War II hero was born there when the property, an arsenal dating back to the 1840s, served as apartments for military officers. Once the Arkansas State Capitol, the Old Statehouse Museum from 1833 today showcases the 19th century House of Representative chambers and Arkansas First Families and First Ladies’ gowns.

Oklahoma museums worth noting include the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, which highlights Western art, cowboys and rodeos, Native American culture, and Victorian firearms. While in Tulsa, stop at the Gilcrease Museum to see the plaster molds of Abraham Lincoln’s life mask and hands taken in 1860, along with artworks and other historic artifacts.

“Exploring history offers a chance to learn ethical and moral lessons,” Fort Smith’s Cody Faber concludes. “There are tens of thousands of human stories here—life lessons on how to study the failures and successes of history.”