



Early banks in Arthur had colorful history

The First National Bank of Arthur

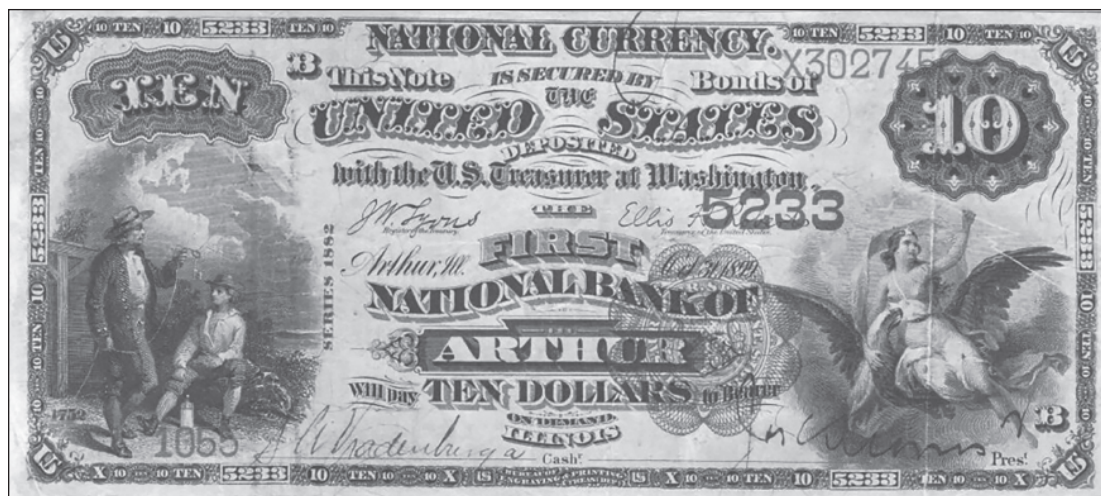
Arthur's first bank was organized in February 1890 by James E. Morris, Fred Matters, Asa B. Warren, and Sol Dorman. This was the first bank incorporated in Moultrie County. It was located on the southwest corner of Vine and Illinois streets. It was known as the Arthur Bank.

On Nov. 8, 1899, the bank converted to a National Bank with capital stock of \$50,000. Fred Matters was elected president and James E. Morris was elected cashier. The bank became known as The First National Bank of Arthur.

One of the benefits of being a National Bank was that the Federal Reserve would issue paper money with the bank's name and charter number printed on it. This was an attempt by the government to instill confidence in the use of paper currency instead of gold and silver coinage by having the local banks' name and their officers' hand-written signatures on the money.

The note pictured above has the signature of James E. Morris, president, and S. A. Vradenburg, cashier, who later became the bank's president. It also displays the bank's charter number 5233, which was also proudly displayed on the front of the bank.

Arthur had the honor of being the home of authoress, Ida Dorman Morris, wife of James Morris who came to Arthur in 1890. It was noted that Mrs. Morris was a very cultured lady and wrote several volumes on nature study and travel including A Pacific Coast Vacation in 1901, Travels of a Water Drop, A Tour of Mexico, Travels of a Barnacle, and Golden Fluff.



James would accompany Ida on her travels and his photographs were used as illustrations in her books. Mrs. Morris was very active in civic affairs, particularly in connection with the library.

The State Bank of Arthur

On March 8, 1910, a permit was issued for the organization of the State Bank of Arthur with capital of \$24,000. The new State Bank eventually located across the street from the First National Bank at the northwest corner of Vine and Illinois streets.

The two banks competed for customers with the First National Bank boasting it had capital stock of \$50,000, a surplus fund of \$10,000 and advertising, "It is unwise to drop an Old Friend." The State Bank countered by advertising it had capital stock of \$25,000 and that "All favors extended consistent with safe banking."

Poor economic conditions had brought down more than 5,000 banks during the 1920s especially when the Stock Market crashed in 1929, and would topple another 5,000 in the first three years of the Great Depression. The banking crisis sparked fear in depositors all across the nation,

causing many people to hoard their cash, even withdrawing funds from financially sound banks. This was the case with the First National Bank.

Seaman A. Vradenburg had been the longest serving president of the First National Bank, but the anxiety and stress that was put upon bank presidents at that time may have played a role in his illness and death at the age of 69 in 1931. Cashier E. W. Boyd was promoted to president and a young man, who had not long before graduated from Arthur High School, Ervin L. Jurgens, became the bank's cashier.

Thirty-six hours after his inauguration, President Roosevelt declared a Bank Holiday on March 6, 1933, and all the banks of the nation closed. When the bank moratorium was over a week later, on March 13, 1933, the State Bank reopened, but the First National Bank did not.

Dr. Charles H. McDonald, Vradenburg's son-in-law, had received his medical degree, but gave up his practice after approximately two years to return to farming. He served as the First National Bank's Chairman of the Board and signed some of the bank's paper money during his father-in-law's illness.

When the bank closed. Dr. McDonald sold some of his farm ground to make sure the bank's depositors received all their money back.

Following a lingering illness, Charles McDonald passed away on March 3, 1950, and was such a highly regarded citizen of the Arthur community that, in respect to the deceased, all Arthur businesses were closed for his funeral.

Ervin L. Jurgens, the young cashier for the First National Bank, began working at the State Bank of Arthur. He became cashier of the State Bank

in 1940 and later assumed the office of president.

On January 11, 1973, ground was broken for a new colonial Williamsburg-style of bank building at 411 S. Vine St. Twelve Belgian draft horses teamed up to break ground as many Arthur citizens watched in the 22-degree weather.

The Great Bank Robbery of 1899

It was a bone-chilling zero degrees outside that early morning in January.

A little after 12 midnight, six masked bandits, having already stolen some of the tools they would need for their crime from other businesses in town, chiseled and punched out the lock on the protective grating door of the First National Bank of Arthur and then pried open the north side entrance door of the bank.

When the robbers got inside, they found the steel grating door of the vault open, so they found themselves in front of the vault without further hindrance.

The vault had 30-inch thick brick walls and a floor of solid concrete. The vault had two sets of doors, each made of half-inch hardened steel. But these obstacles proved little resistance to the expert safe-crackers.

The armed bandits were soon standing in front of a Hall time-lock "burglar-proof" safe in no time. The safe had a 4-inch thick steel door and a money chest inside with 2.5-inch thick walls.

Just then, a young German fellow from Blue Island, who had come to visit his cousin, Joe Kanitz, came to town. The Kanitz family was sick and he had come to find a doctor. Thinking the two bandits who were standing outside the bank as lookouts were night watchmen, he asked them where he could find the residence of the town's doctor.

"Right in here," remarked one of the bandits and, to his amazement, the young man found himself looking into the muzzles of two large revolvers.

The robbers pulled him off his horse, marched him into the bank, placed the young man on the floor, and compelled him to remove his shoes. They searched his pockets, but took neither his money nor his watch.

One bandit kept a gun on their young captive while the two lookouts returned to their positions outside the bank. They told the young man there would be an explosion in a few minutes, but if would remain quiet he would not be hurt.

The safe-crackers did not try to drill the safe, but, instead, were going to "blow" it with nitroglycerin. By using



THE "BURGLAR-PROOF" SAFE after its doors were blown off by nitroglycerin.

a blowpipe or air pump, they carefully injected the nitro into the top crack of the door.

The young captive was getting nervous at all these events and, when he saw one of the robbers get a rope, he thought, "If it was hanging me they were after, I'd better be getting out."

One of the robbers lit a long fuse that led to the safe while the others took cover.

The explosion propelled steel parts from the safe through the front window of the bank and through the window of the Odd Fellows building clear across the street.

The young man ran and, with all his might, jumped against the guards and fled out the door. As the young man ran across the street without his shoes he fell down on the frozen ground, and the bullets from the bandits' guns passed over his head. He sailed up Vine Street yelling, "help" and "murder" at every breath.

The robbers, after letting their prisoner escape, hurriedly gathered up all the valuables they could find in

the blown safe, and made their way to the Vandalia train house where they stole a hand car and headed to Arcola on the railroad tracks.

The next day, bloodhounds were called in from Sullivan and a Pinkerton Detective Agency man arrived on the scene with some clue as to who the perpetrators were.

He reported that the work was done by "experts" who divided up in Arcola. Three went north by freight train that morning and three went south on another train.

But the suspects were never caught and had managed to get away with gold, silver, and paper money amounting to \$3,720 along with diamonds valued at around \$300, an amount equivalent to approximately \$150,000 today.

The editor of the Arthur Graphic put it this way, "Our city will be familiarly spoken of in the annals of crime yet to be written and we will rank along with Coffeyville, Kansas and other western towns where outlaws have reigned supreme..."



THE JAMES E. MORRIS HOME, circa 1905, at 414 E.Park St. was considered one of the nicest homes in Arthur until it burned to the ground in the 1940s.



THE STATE BANK OF ARTHUR (far left building) on the northwest corner of Vine and Illinois streets circa 1930. In 1952, the bank purchased the adjoining building to the north and remodeled it for bank use.



S. A. VRADENBURG, president of the bank at this time, standing in front of the First National Bank of Arthur No. 5233 with a bank teller. This is the same building where Arthur First Bank now operates.

Celebrating 150 Years

1873 2023

Arthur Sesquicentennial

Congratulations from

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