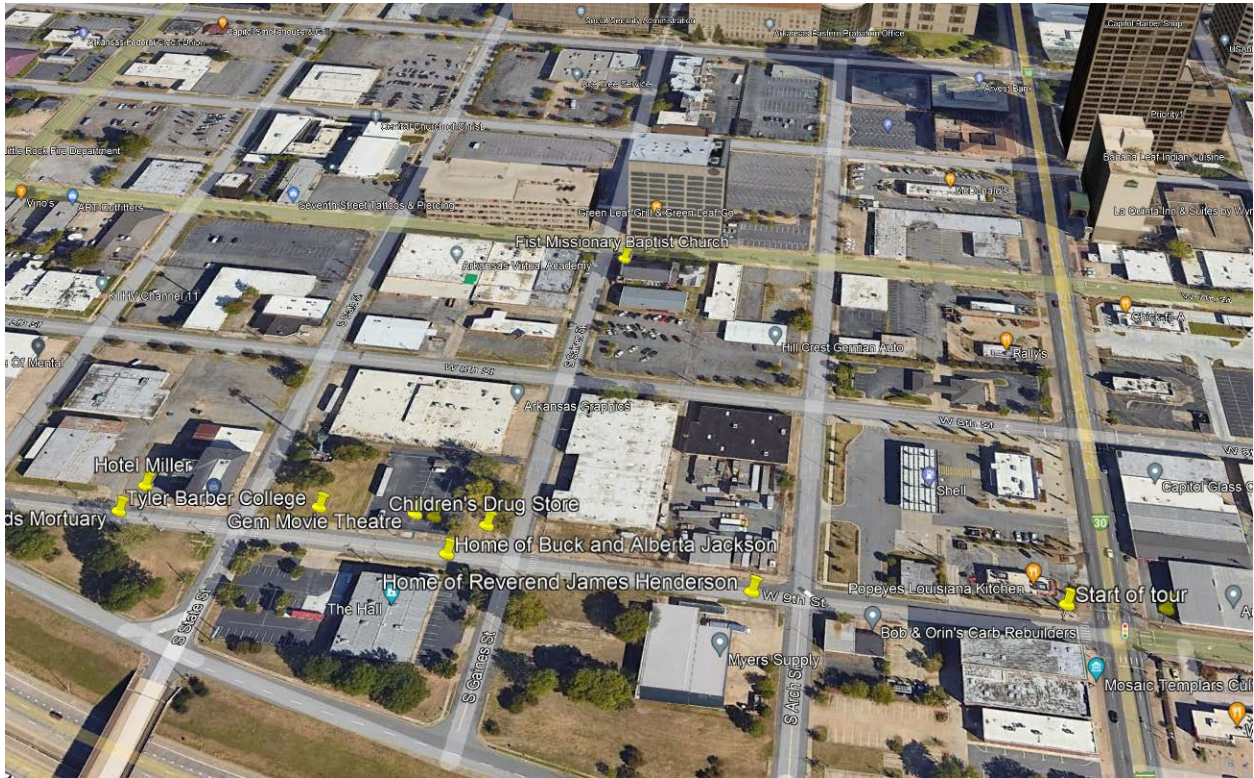


# Walking Tour Map



## Historical Walking Tours of West Ninth Street

by Brian Rodgers

Here we are, standing on historic West Ninth Street in the heart of downtown Little Rock.

The history of West Ninth Street dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when at the dawn of the American Civil War, a triangle of Black churches ministered to free Blacks as well as to the enslaved living nearby. A small Black community called Blissville was composed of free and enslaved Blacks and was the heart of the area in Little Rock.

When most people think about chattel slavery in the United States, they imagine large-scale plantations. They imagine operations with rows and rows of cotton, hundreds of people working in the fields, and the classic antebellum, big house with slave cabins far in the distance. This version of slavery existed in the rural South, but in cities like Little Rock, the institution looked drastically different. Although there were plantations in the area, most slavery in Little Rock was small-scale. A typical operation had five to seven enslaved people working on a property. They usually consisted of a driver, a gardener, a few people working with the animals, a team of cooks, and some domestic workers. In some instances, enslaved people were allowed to live off-site. In Little Rock, this off-site location was around the area we are exploring today.

Slavery ended in Little Rock in 1863, and as Reconstruction began, Black businesses soon began to emerge on West Ninth. The area became a city within a city because of the segregation policy in the South. Businesses opened, flourished, and perished on West Ninth Street during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. West Ninth Street survived two world wars and the Great Depression; however, the period of West Ninth Street's history that we will focus on is the 1950s, a traumatic time in the history of Little Rock.

Let's back up. Why should we care about what happened in one area of Little Rock? Why should we care about the conditions that caused the rise and fall of West Ninth Street? Because what happened in Little Rock happened nationwide and specifically in the South. The example of West 9th Street gives insight into conditions Black Americans faced and would face throughout the country. West Ninth Street was also the origin of the Black middle class in Little Rock. The men and women who owned and operated businesses along West Ninth would be the first members of the Black middle class.

Black business districts throughout the country were growing because they were needed. At the time of the initial rise of West Ninth Street, Black codes prohibited Black residents from using white businesses, and white supremacy policies and beliefs prevented large numbers of white residents from looking at Black people as equals. This created the need for Black people to have Black communities and business districts to survive. In Little Rock, the people starting businesses along West Ninth Street became the city's first Black, middle-class residents. They were the beginnings of the political class and were some of the more familiar figures in Little Rock's Black history. The people we will visit on this tour are from a wide slice of African American life, including educated and uneducated people, professionals, and the working class.

### **Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church 425 West Ninth St.**



*Courtesy of the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System,*

*Clifton Hull photograph collection - Little Rock (PHO 37.A) Box 2, File 112*

**Current view of 425 W. Ninth St. Photo courtesy Brian Rodgers**

If you look to your right, you will see the former home of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, which moved to this location at 815 West 16<sup>th</sup> St. in 1970. Bethel AME was founded in 1863 by Nathan Warren. Warren was born enslaved in Washington, D.C., and was brought to Arkansas by his enslaver, Robert

Crittenden. Sometime later, Warren was emancipated. He married an enslaved woman and started a family. However, Warren was forced to leave during the free Black expulsion of 1859. Act 131 prohibited free Blacks or mulattos from living in Arkansas.

During his expulsion, he went to Washington D.C. but returned to Little Rock in 1863, when he founded Bethel, the first AME congregation in Arkansas. The congregation constructed a sanctuary in 1866.

During the 1927 lynching of John Carter, Bethel was attacked. Members of the white mob broke into the church, stole pews, and used the pews to construct the pyre on which they burned Carter's body.

Between 1953 and 1986, the church became a hub for civil rights activities thanks to the leadership of pastor Rufus K. Young.

Young was born in 1911 in Bayou Bartholomew in Drew County to Robert and Laura Young. During his early life, he lived with his maternal and paternal grandparents at different times. He was licensed to preach in 1927 and was pastor of Visitors Chapel AME in Hot Springs. He also was an instructor at Jackson Theological Seminary before he became the pastor of Bethel.

Young was a prominent Greater Little Rock Ministerial Alliance member and an active participant in the African American struggle for civil rights. Three of the Little Rock Nine – Earnest Young, Gloria Ray, and Melba Pattillo – were members of Bethel AME. Daisy Bates and Rufus Young were friends.

## 615 W. Ninth St.



**Home of Rev. James F. Henderson**

*Courtesy of Butler Center for Arkansas Studies,*

*Central Arkansas Library System, Quapaw Quarter Association records (MSS.06.15), Series VI, Box 6*



**Current location**

*Photo courtesy of Brian Rodgers*

As we approach the 600 block of West Ninth Street, we see the former location of the home of Rev. James Henderson and his family.

Rev. Henderson was the pastor of Allison Presbyterian Church, also located on Ninth Street. He was installed as pastor at Allison Presbyterian Church in 1942. He shared this home with his wife Mildred, son James, Jr., and niece Ruby O'Hara.

James and Mildred were born in South Carolina in 1911 and 1915, respectively. James, Jr. was born in Little Rock in 1944.

The couple was very active in the community. Rev. Henderson served as president of the Greater Little Rock Ministerial Alliance, an organization of local ministers focused on defeating segregation in Little Rock and strengthening interfaith relationships. The organization featured prominent clergy, including Rufus K. Young, Roland Smith, and Rabbi Ira Sanders of Congregation B'nai Israel. He was a City Beautiful Commission commissioner and a strong local Boy Scout troop supporter. Mildred was an elementary school English teacher and the chairwoman of the public relations committee of the YWCA.

Ruby O'Hara, the Hendersons' niece, was the daughter of James' sister Caroline and her husband Raphael O'Hara. She was born in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1928 and moved with her family to New Bern Craven, North Carolina, in 1940. She joined her uncle in Little Rock to attend Philander Smith College, where she majored in sociology and graduated in 1950 with distinction. She also won Queen of Hearts at the Sweetheart Ball, hosted by a local Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority chapter.

**First Missionary Baptist Church  
701 S. Gaines St.**



*Courtesy Duane & Tracy Marsteller*

We are now at the historic First Baptist Church (FBC) at 701 S. Gaines St.

Founded in 1845, this church is among the oldest Black congregations in the state.

The church was founded by an enslaved man named Wilson Brown, who requested and won permission to organize a church for enslaved people in the area. The church held services outside in a brush arbor for the first few years. A permanent structure was built in 1847. The current Gothic-style building was constructed in 1882.

First Baptist Church was at the forefront of the fight for civil rights in Arkansas. In 1891, an estimated 600 members of the Black community, including members of the Mosaic Templars of America, met at FBC and marched to the state capitol to protest the proposed separate coach law. Some of the city's earliest Juneteenth celebrations were held at First Baptist. In 1905, about 1,500 people met at the church to celebrate freedom.

First Baptist Church hosted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963. Rev. Roland Smith, a college friend of King's, invited King to speak for the church's 125 anniversary a few months before the historic march on Washington, D.C. Rev. Smith also was co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

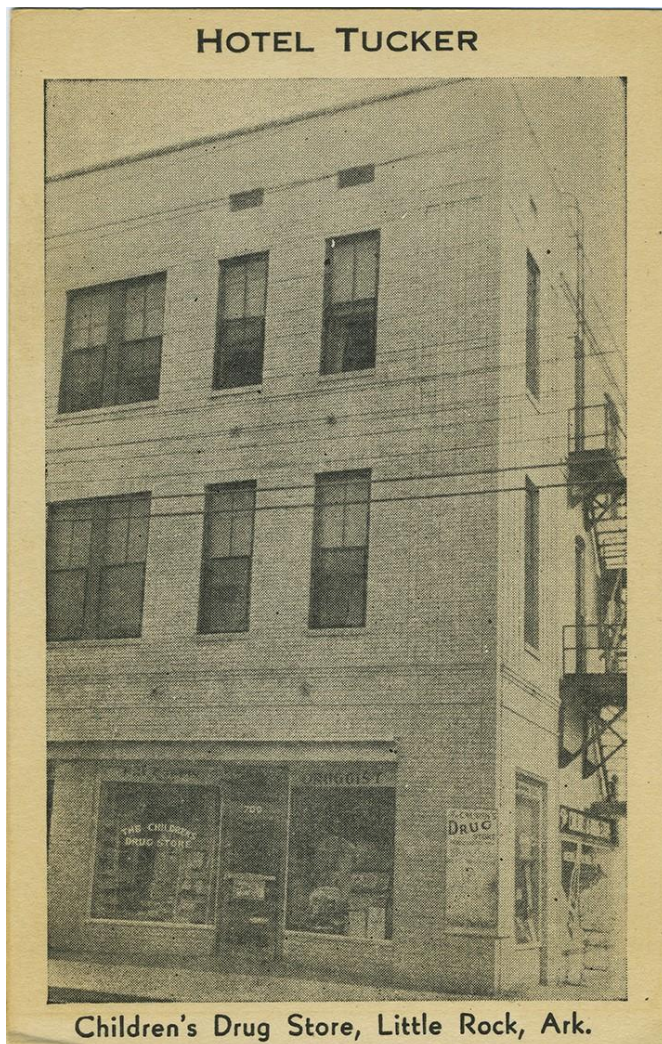
Rev. Smith was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He met King while they were students at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Smith was elected pastor of FBC in December 1946.

Smith was pivotal in the fight for civil rights in Arkansas. He was a member of the Greater Little Rock Ministerial Alliance. He was the only Black citizen allowed to address the state legislature in opposition to a series of segregationist bills passed in 1957.

Smith wed Ruth Smith, but she died before Smith came to Little Rock in 1946.

Smith was last documented in Little Rock in 1959. Members of the church say Smith moved back to Atlanta in the early 1960s. Today, the church continues to serve the African American community of Little Rock.

**Children's Drug Store  
700 W. Ninth St.**



*Courtesy Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, Pulaski County Black History photograph collection (PHO 2.A.4), Box 2, File 103*

Our next stop on this tour is 700 West Ninth Street, where the former home of Children's Drug Store is located. Although this lot is now vacant, there was once a glorious, multistory brick building.



The building first appears in historical records in 1895 and is listed as GE Jones Drug Co. George Jones owned it, and Frank Coffin was an employee at the store.

Dr. Frank Coffin was among the best-known Black business owners of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Coffin was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1870. He attended Rust College, Fisk University, and Meharry Medical School.

After graduating from Meharry in 1893, he moved to Little Rock. Once he arrived, he began working for George Jones at the Drug Store. In 1898, Coffin purchased the drugstore from Jones. He worked and lived there until he moved into a house at 1118 Izard St. sometime between 1911 and 1912.

Dr. Coffin was married twice. He married Josie Pettie in 1902 and Lottie Woodford in 1920.

Around 1928, the name of Coffin's Drug Store was changed to Children's Drug Store. The store tagline in advertisements was, "Follow the Children to Children's Drug Store."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being a druggist, Coffin was also a published poet. He owned and operated the Children's Drug Store until he died in 1951.

The story of Children's Drug Store continued after Dr. Coffin died in 1951. The drugstore was owned by William Morgan, and Aubrey Oates worked there. Both men were white.

Children's Drug Store last appeared in the historical record in 1956.

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<sup>1</sup> "Where to Find It, For Your Home and Personal Needs," *Arkansas State Press* (Little Rock, AR), May 17, 1946.

**Gem Building**  
**710-712 W. Ninth St.**



*PHC00004281, PHC photo file, Arkansas State Archives, Little Rock, Arkansas*

710-712 W. Ninth Street Current Day



*Courtesy Brian Rodgers*

The Gem Building contained William Fontaine's Barbershop and the Gem Theatre. The building's front contained three entrances with three separate addresses. The entrance to Williams Fontaine's barber shop was at 710 W. Ninth St.; the entrance to Gem Movie Theatre was at 712 W. Ninth St.; and 714 W. Ninth St. was vacant in the last few years of the 1950s.

### **Fontaine's Barber Shop 710 W. Ninth St.**

William Lee Fontaine was born in 1901 in Clow, Arkansas, in Hempstead County, about two hours southwest of Little Rock. He was the only child of Milton and Josephine Fontaine.

In 1927, he married Ellen Brooks of Dermont, Arkansas. Born in 1901, Brooks was the daughter of Gen. Grant Brooks and Ellen Verdia Young. The couple moved to Little Rock and became very successful.

William was a barber and owned both Fontaine's Barber Shop in the Gem Building and a two-story building at 722 W. Ninth St. His wife was a registered nurse who worked at St. Vincent's Hospital. The couple had one daughter, Carrolin.

Ellen Brooks was an international traveler, and in 1959, she traveled with a group of African American women on a ten-country, 85-city European tour.

William died in 1962 from injuries sustained in a motor vehicle accident. His wife died in 2000.

### **Gem Theatre 712 W. Ninth St.**

In 1958, Central Arkansas was the home to 25 movie theaters. The Gem Theatre was advertised as “Little Rock’s only theatre exclusively for colored people.”<sup>2</sup>

The Gem Theatre opened in 1910 and was repurposed in 1930 as a Black theater. The Gem Theatre was a one-screen theater that had 632 seats. It underwent extension renovations in 1943.

In addition to showing movies, the Gem hosted community meetings for civic groups like the Junior Deputy Sheriffs. It also hosted special screenings during Negro History Week in February.

Houston Pace, a Little Rock native, worked as a projectionist at the Gem Theatre.

Pace was born in Little Rock in 1928 and was later stationed in California after enlisting in the U.S. Army. In 1940, Pace lived with his mother, Dorothy Martin, his sister Sylvia Horton, and his nephew, Louis Horton. They lived at 2623 W. Ninth St.

He married Eloise Branscumb on March 8, 1954. Then, Pace enlisted in the Army in 1956 and served until 1959. He died in Riverside, California, on Oct. 1, 2005, at 77.

The Gem Theatre closed in 1958; the last movie screened was “The Ten Commandments.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Arkansas State Press (Little Rock, AR), Jan. 21, 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Arkansas State Press (Little Rock, AR), Jan. 3, 1958.

**Home of Buck and Alberta Jackson  
713 W. Ninth St.**



*Courtesy Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, Quapaw Quarter Association records (MSS.06.15), Series VI, Box 6*



*Present day 713 W. Ninth Street. Courtesy Brian Rodgers*

This location, at 713 W. Ninth St., was once the home of a folk-Victorian-style house where Buck and Alberta Jackson lived.

The Jacksons moved into this house sometime between 1931 and 1933. Buck Jackson was born in Scott, Arkansas, in 1894. His parents were Jeffrey Jackson and Lizzie Allen.

Jackson completed the fourth grade and worked as a laborer for the Missouri Pacific Railroad. He later served in World War I.

Alberta Jackson was born in Arkansas in 1896. She completed fifth grade and worked at a laundering establishment as a sheet liner.

Alberta Jackson had a son from a previous marriage to William Golden. Her son, William Golden, Jr., was born in 1914.

Buck Jackson died in 1944 from myocarditis. Alberta Jackson died in 1972.

Alberta Jackson's son married Alice Jackson on May 16, 1938. They lived together for two years at 812 W. Ninth St. Although still married, William Golden, Jr. returned to his parents' home in 1940. He filed for divorce, claiming his wife deserted him and their marriage.

### **Tyler Barber College 728 W. Ninth St.**



*Courtesy Arkansas State Press (Little Rock, AR), Sept. 5, 1947. Arkansas State Archives*

In 1956, ten barber or beauty shops were on West Ninth Street. Among those, the Tyler Barber College opened on March 18, 1946, at 728 W. Ninth St.

Tyler Barber College was a chain of national barber and beauty schools started by H.M. Morgan in 1933. Morgan wanted to create a way to train Black men and women in barbering after the Texas Barber Law was passed in 1929. The law established regulations over the craft of barbering and included licensing.

F.D. Hines first managed the Little Rock campus. Later, Elvin Taylor was the manager.

Elvin Taylor was born to Clayton and Birdie Taylor on Oct. 31, 1926, in Batesville, Arkansas. The family moved to 1118 High St. in Little Rock around 1929.

Taylor attended Dunbar High School, where he played basketball.

Clayton Taylor was a barber, and his son, Elvin, followed in his father's footsteps and became a barber. Clayton Taylor owned Clayton Taylor's barbershop. In addition to working with his father, Elvin Taylor worked at Elite Barber & Beauty Shop.

He married Robbie Counts on July 5, 1947. The couple had one son, Elvie, born in February 1950.

Elvin and Robbie Taylor lived at different locations in Little Rock, including 812½ W. Ninth St. At one point, they moved in with Beulah Manning, a woman from Louisiana, at 1213 State St., until settling at 1315 S. Chester St. in 1958.

Elvin Taylor died on January 14, 2000.

**Hotel Miller**  
**812 ½ W. Ninth St.**



*Courtesy Arkansas State Press (Little Rock, AR), Dec. 22, 1950. Arkansas State Archives*



*Present day 815 W. Ninth St. Courtesy Brian Rodgers*



The Hotel Miller at 812 ½ W. Ninth St. opened July 30, 1949. It was advertised in the State Press as “newly decorated” with “28 rooms and Beautyrest mattresses.”<sup>4</sup>

The hotel rented “comfortably furnished” rooms daily or monthly. In 1958, the hotel was managed by E. Dewey Killingsworth. His wife, Norma Stephens Killingsworth, was the proprietor of the hotel. The hotel was associated with two other businesses in Little Rock: Miller Funeral Home at 814 W. Ninth St. and an apartment building at 2400 High St. The funeral home was originally founded by P.K. Miller in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, in 1925.

The proprietor of Hotel Miller was Norma Stephens Killingsworth, born Norma Lee Lindsay in Wilmot, Arkansas, in 1907. In 1940, she was widowed and lived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. She completed two years of college and was a bookkeeper at the Miller Funeral Home. In 1941, she married Sam Stephens but divorced Stephens in 1946. The couple did not have children. In 1951, Norma married E. Dewey Killingsworth. She and Killingsworth operated both the hotel and the funeral home. They lived in the apartment complex at 2408 High St. for a time. Then, in 1950, the couple lived at 1225 W. 10<sup>th</sup> St. The pair divorced in 1958.

Norma Killingsworth was very involved in the Black community of Little Rock. She was a member of the Woman’s Sunshine Club, the YWCA World Fellowship Committee, and Wesley Methodist Church. In addition to her work with the hotel, the funeral home, and civic duties, she was a notary public.

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<sup>4</sup> “Again-“, *Arkansas State Press* (Little Rock, AR), Jul. 29, 1949.

**United Friends Mortuary  
815 W. Ninth St.**



*Courtesy of the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, Quapaw Quarter Association records (MSS.06.15), Series VI, Box 6*

If you look to your left, you will see the former location of the United Friends Mortuary.

The United Friends Mortuary was a part of the United Friends of America organization. The local organization was founded by Rev. Caleb D. Pettaway and Dr. Fred T. Jones in 1918. The organization was a mutual-aid society like the Mosaic Templars of America and the Knights of Pythias. These organizations were created before the federal welfare system was enacted in 1935 and were designed to assist Black families in times of need. The United Friends, which had the motto “We Serve In Life, We Serve In Death,” provided insurance, hospitalization, and funeral arrangements for its members.<sup>5</sup>

Caleb Pettaway was born in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, in 1886. He moved to Arkansas around 1918 and married Jennie Vagner. They purchased a home at

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<sup>5</sup> Arkansas State Press (Little Rock, AR), Dec. 26, 1947.

519 E. 21<sup>st</sup> St. in Little Rock. The couple had two children: Paul (b. 1919) and Louise (b.1922). Jennie Vagner Pettaway died in 1944, and Caleb Pettaway married Cleola Hampton in 1958.

Pettaway earned a degree from Philander Smith College and attended the University of Chicago. He was a well-respected pastor in Central Arkansas. He served as pastor of both Shiloh Baptist and Saint Luke Baptist churches and was president of the National Baptist Convention of America from 1957 to 1967.

Pettaway died in 1968, and his son, Paul, died a few weeks later.

Pettaway's second wife, Cleola, assumed control of the United Friends of America until she died in 1975.

The United Friends Mortuary in Little Rock handled the funeral arrangements for many prominent African Americans, including Dr. Frank Coffin and businessmen A. L. Witherspoon and Lawrence Alexander Patterson. In addition to the Little Rock location, the United Friends Undertakers offered services in several other Arkansas cities, including Malvern, Arkadelphia, and DeWitt.

## **Conclusion**

This concludes our tour. Thank you for joining me today. But before we end, I want to talk a little about why West Ninth looks the way it does today. If you look to the south, you will see Interstate 630. Interstate 630 is a concrete divide in our city, running east-west and dividing communities north and south of Interstate 630. Not only does Interstate 630 serve as a divide, but it was also the catalyst for the fall of West Ninth Street from prominence. The original plan for the crosstown expressway was to follow the route of Eighth Street. This sparked many of the business owners on West Ninth Street to plan to relocate. Some voluntarily relocated, while others were forced to leave the area.

The last Black businesses to leave the area were nightclubs. With businesses gone from West Ninth, crime increased. Drugs and prostitution flooded the area. The increased crime gave city officials evidence in their claim that the area was blighted. The few remaining businesses were forced out. The land that was in the hands of Black business owners for almost a century was then purchased by white citizens, and the story of Black West Ninth became a footnote to the history of Little Rock.

West Ninth Street became an industrial area bordered to the north by downtown Little Rock and Interstate 630 on the south. Shipping companies, printers, and a

janitorial supply wholesale company inhabit it. In 2008, the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, Arkansas's Museum of African American History and Culture, opened. With the museum's opening, Black people returned to West Ninth Street.



