



Bicyclists crossing the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge have a view of the Little Rock skyline and a wetlands preserve with serpentine boardwalk.

BLAZING A TRAIL IN LITTLE ROCK

Hop on a bike to explore the riverfront in Arkansas' capital.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER • Special to the Post-Dispatch



The spokes of the bikes cast long shadows in the late afternoon sun, but the sound of tires on pavement can't be heard over the roar of water rushing over the dam below. Their silence adds a surreal twist to the steady stream of bicyclists gliding 90 feet over the Arkansas River on the Big Dam Bridge.

The longest bicycle and pedestrian bridge in the world built specifically for such use, the bridge marks the halfway point on a 14.2-mile loop of paved path that starts in Little Rock, Ark. For many bicyclists, it's the high point of the journey.

You might think of the Arkansas capital as a place for indoor discoveries in its many museums and historic sites, but outdoor pursuits begin just steps from

downtown hotels on the Arkansas River Trail. Rent a bike and set off along the riverfront, passing public art, crossing four pedestrian bridges, skirting parks and scaring up wildlife. You might spot a great blue heron, some scissortail flycatchers, hawks or deer. Need a break? Stop at a handful of attractions along the way.

Mile zero on the trail is the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge, a Rock Island Railroad Bridge built in 1899 and renovated as a ramped bike and pedestrian path stretching 1,600 feet across the river. It overlooks the Little Rock skyline and 13 acres of preserved wetlands accessed by a winding boardwalk. The William J. Clinton Presidential Library next door tells the story of the Arkansas native who

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Bicyclists pedal across the Big Dam Bridge over the Arkansas River in Little Rock. The bridge was built solely for recreational use and marks the halfway point of a 14.2-mile loop on the Arkansas River Trail that starts near the Clinton Presidential Library.

HOME AWAY **YOUR TRAVELS**



From the top, clockwise: Bicyclists on the Arkansas River Trail can buy a peach or other treats for their ride at the Farmers Market in Little Rock. Junction Bridge, a former railroad bridge built in 1884, is one of four bridges on the Arkansas River Trail. Bicyclists use it to cross the Arkansas River between Little Rock and North Little Rock. The William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Sculptures in Little Rock's Riverfront Park are a treat for the eyes for bicyclists passing on the Arkansas River Trail.

LITTLE ROCK • FROM H1

Big events happen at Riverfront Park

rose from humble beginnings to become governor before leaving for the White House. Stop in for a look at the president's saxophone, replicas of the Oval Office and Cabinet Room and a 100-foot-long timeline detailing the Clinton presidency.

Push off toward downtown and soon you're riding along 11 blocks of Riverfront Park where children play in a spray pad and fountain and concerts are held in an outdoor amphitheater. This is the place to be on the Fourth of July for Pops on the River and over the Memorial Day weekend for Riverfest, Little Rock's largest annual event. Fuel up in the food hall inside the River Market building or buy a juicy Arkansas peach at the outdoor farmers market held here Tuesday and Saturday mornings, May through October.

A curious chunk of history sits in the park right on the south bank of the river. La Petite Roche, French for Little Rock, was the name given to this outcropping of stone by explorers navigating the river in the early 1800s. To them it marked the transition from the level lands of the east to the rugged hills and mountains of the west. It became a natural landing spot for those passing through by boat. The name stuck.

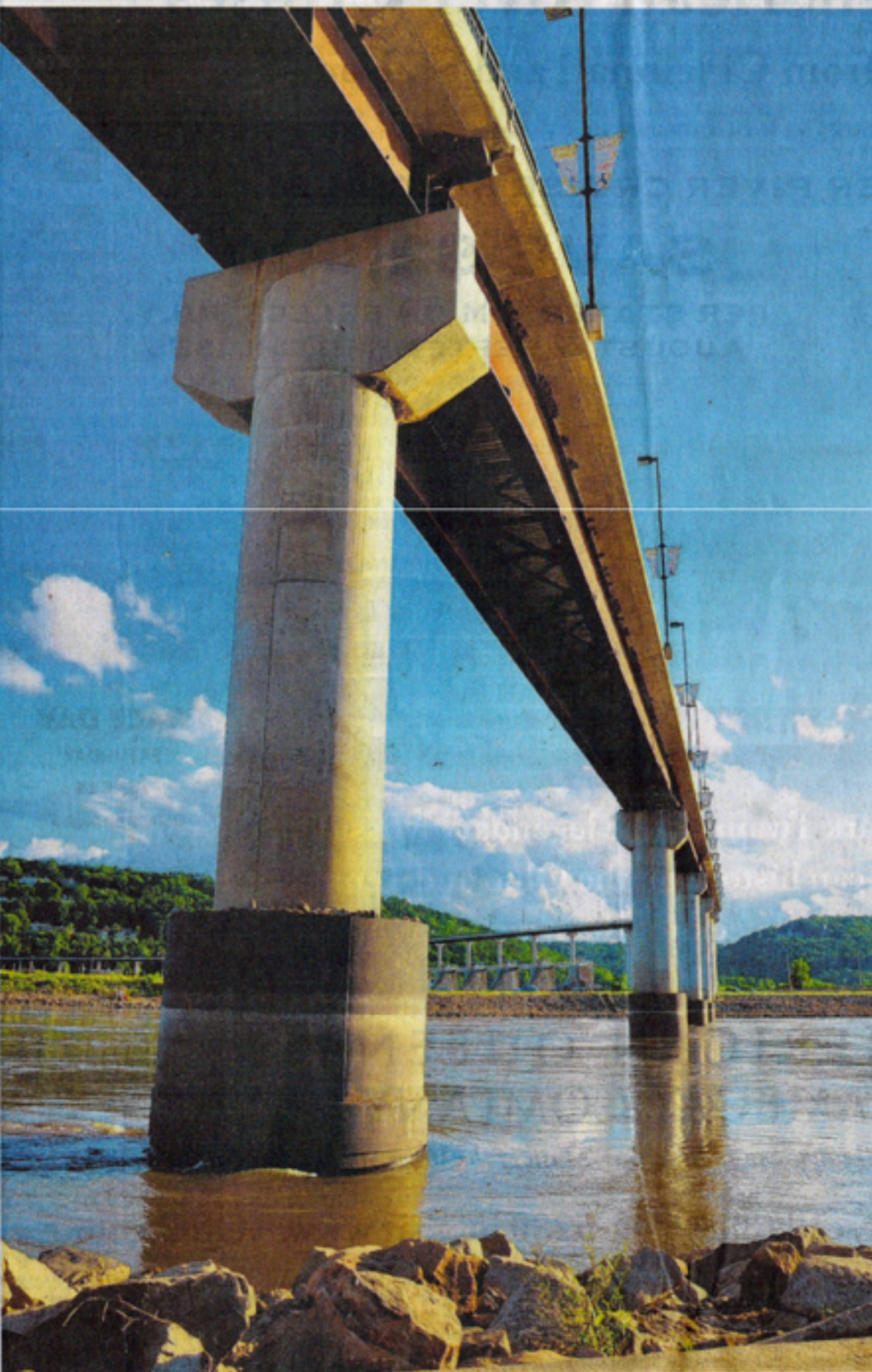
The graceful metal skeleton of Junction Bridge rises from the park's riverbank. Built in 1884 as a railroad bridge, it has a lift span that could be raised to allow barges to pass below. It opened to pedestrians and bicyclists in 2008 as part of the Arkansas River Trail with the lift span permanently affixed in the up position. Walkers and riders access it from an elevator holding two people and two bikes at a time.

Thirty pieces of outdoor

art inspired by the themes of President Bill Clinton's acceptance speech at the 1996 Democratic convention are scattered through Riverfront Park. Just off the trail, the Old State House is worth a detour. The white Greek Revival building was Arkansas' Capitol from 1833 to 1911 and served as both Union and Confederate capitols during the Civil War. The world's spotlight shone on it in 1992 and 1996 when it was the headquarters of Clinton's election night celebrations. It's now a museum of Arkansas history.

From downtown Little Rock the trail follows city streets before diverting onto a dedicated pedestrian and bike path passing parks and a golf course before coming to the Big Dam Bridge after mile No. 7. Open in 2006 strictly for recreation, the concrete ribbon curves 4,226 feet across the river over the Murray Dam where boats and barges wait their turn to pass through the lock. On the shore, fishermen cast a line to try their luck. Walkers, some with dogs on a leash, share the path with runners and bikers. Near the top they pause at an observation deck where benches provide respite. At night the bridge is lit by LED lamps programmed for 16 million color schemes.

From the Big Dam Bridge you have a choice of looping back along the north bank of the river to return to your starting point through North Little Rock or continuing on a couple miles above the mouth of the river to Two Rivers Bridge across the Little Maumelle River. If you have any strength left in your legs, you can ride on to Pinnacle Mountain State Park, ditch the bike and climb the cone-shaped mountain for a view 1,000 feet over the Arkansas River Valley.



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The Big Dam Bridge opened in 2006 as a path for bicyclists and pedestrians on the Arkansas River Trail in Little Rock. At 4,226 feet, it's the longest bike and pedestrian bridge in the world built strictly for such use.

IF YOU GO

Information • Arkansas River Trail, arkansasrivertrail.org; Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau, littlerock.com, 1-800-844-4781

Bike rentals • Bobby's Bike Hike in the River Market, 400 President Clinton Avenue, Little Rock, 1-501-613-7001, bobbysbikehike.com/littlerock; from \$7 an hour, \$26 per day. Fikes Bikes, in River Trail Station, 140 Riverfront Drive, North Little Rock, 1-501-374-5505, fikesbikes.com; from \$6 an hour, \$28 per day. Both rental shops have children's bikes and trailers.