

# A NEW HOME for SIMMONS BANK

BY AUDREY HANES  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

More than 40 years after opening its doors along Caraway Road, Jonesboro's branch of Simmons Bank has a new home. The longstanding local bank kept the well-known location of its main branch but is now occupying a brand-new state-of-the-art building that will allow Simmons to continue to offer comprehensive financial solutions with a client-centric approach for decades to come.

Simmons Bank, a subsidiary of Simmons First National Corporation, began in Pine Bluff in 1903. More than a century later, Simmons Bank (Simmons) operates 234 branches in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas.

The Jonesboro branch of Simmons was established in 1984 after the Simmons Corporation acquired the bank charter of First National Bank & Trust, which operated out of a large building at the corner of South Caraway Road and King Street and had been in business since 1977. Led by CEO and Chairman Don Stone and President Ron Jackson, the location quickly established itself as a hometown bank that truly cared about its customers. Simmons has since added additional locations in Jonesboro on Southwest Drive and Washington Avenue, along with two area ATMS. The NEA region also includes the Weiner and Paragould locations.

Kent Bridger, the regional community president of Northeast Arkansas, has been with Simmons for almost 30 years and is the longest tenured associate locally. The lifelong Jonesboro resident,



*Kent Bridger, regional community president for Simmons Bank, stands inside the newly constructed state-of-the-art building on Caraway Road, where Simmons Bank has stood for more than 40 years.*

a CPA who graduated from Arkansas State University, touched all areas in banking on his path to president, including operations, retail and lending.

"I enjoy the people, the interactions with the customers and the associates alike," said Bridger. "I try my best to surround myself with really smart people. You're at work more than at home, so you really should love what you do and the people around you. If you have your faith first, family second and job third, if you do that, you'll be really happy."

Bridger works closely with Amy Hughes, the region's business development officer, a new role for the bank in which she serves as a liaison between all the lines of business. She also works to identify prospects, generate leads and provide information about all banking products to prospective and current clients that would enhance their financial position.

"Three years ago, I was looking for a career change," said Hughes, a University of Arkansas graduate. "I'd always seen Simmons as a community member of Jonesboro; growing up, it was always very well-respected, and I was close with (then-Simmons president) Barry Ledbetter as a child – he signified all the things you look for in a company."

"In my new role, being able to collaborate with so many different areas, it was the best of all the industries I had been a part of in the past. I was lucky enough to be brought on the team.



This role is new to Simmons; two years ago, it was an idea to bring about this division, myself being the representative in NEA. It's been awesome to create and cultivate what a business development officer does here."

Both Bridger and Hughes look to former Simmons president Ledbetter as an example of someone whose exemplary banking, business and community practices made him one of the best in the business.

"Barry really set the foundation of what Simmons in Jonesboro is," said Bridger. "Barry and Ron Jackson hired me in the beginning. The thing that's really unusual about Barry – he worked here 38 years – is that this is the only bank he has ever worked at. I'm in that same boat. He has been a great mentor and advocate for Jonesboro and the surrounding community. He has also been a great advocate for Simmons."

Ledbetter started at the bank as a management trainee in August 1985. A graduate of A-State with a degree in finance, he went on to earn his master's degree in business administration, also from A-State, as well as a graduate degree in banking from Southern Methodist University.

"Back in 2013, Simmons had eight separate bank charters," said Ledbetter. "We then collapsed into one, Simmons First National, so in 2014 I went to Little Rock and became executive vice president of the bank on a corporate level. I retired in December 2022 to spend more time with my five grandkids, two of whom are here in



Jonesboro, and three are in Franklin, Tennessee."

Ledbetter credits Jackson and then-CEO Don Stone with setting a community-minded focus when Simmons got its start in Jonesboro, one that he passed along first to Daniel Robinson, then to Bridger.

"What set us apart from other banks was that we really prided ourselves on having local management and local decisions," said Ledbetter. "We made those decisions here locally for customers, and the corporation always allowed us a lot of flexibility in doing that because we had proven to perform at a high level. We have always had local people delivering good customer service. ...

"As I reflect back on my career at Simmons, my favorite memory is the relationships I developed over those 38 years with my fellow work associates, the customers, and being involved with the community and at church."

Although he handled many large loans over the years, especially his years in corporate, Ledbetter says it was the smaller loans for the people he had relationships within his community that really stuck with him.

"I enjoyed the large customers, but I really enjoyed the smaller customers and really making a difference in their lives," said Ledbetter. "It's nice to help people in business, but it's also meaningful to help people reach personal goals, like buying a house or a car, things that really made a difference in their lives."

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## COVER FEATURE



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**regional community president, Simmons Bank**

me start my business 30 years ago, and I still have that business today.' Knowing we helped them reach their business goals is my favorite part. When I got to Little Rock I handled some very large loans, but the greatest satisfaction I ever had was doing those small loans to make a big difference in their lives."

Ledbetter says the local bank is in great hands now with Bridger at the helm, along with a deep roster of associates who really enjoy what they do.

"We are dealing with second and third generation customers now," he said. "When I think of how we are still here and are such a good longstanding bank in the community, I think there are four groups we have responsibility to: our shareholders, our associates, our customers and our community.

"As a bank, we have that responsibility; if you take good care of your associates and generate a good work environment for them, they're going to take really good care of our customers because they have high morale and great attitudes. ... We continue to recruit associates who have that same culture mindset and commitment, and with that, we end up with a lot of really good bankers involved

in the community who take great care of our customers."

Following several decades of growth and success in Northeast Arkansas, it was time to upgrade the bank's main location in Jonesboro so that the building itself would be as updated as Simmons' banking practices. Not wanting to leave its well-known location, management made the decision to level the old building and start from scratch.

"Our existing building had run its course, from windows leaking to the AC going out; it was easier to rebuild," said Bridger. "I looked throughout Jonesboro, and this was still the best location for us. A new building was approved in the budget for years before it was ever built, and it finally became its year."

After more than two years of construction, Simmons' 19,790-square-foot main branch is ready to open its doors to customers. Designed by Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects and built by Flync Construction, the new building is a full-service branch with four drive-thru lanes and an ATM.

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**former Simmons Bank president**



main thing in the design is that it's all built with the customer in mind. There is easy access to teller areas and high traffic areas, and there are high ceilings and glass everywhere, inside and out. All departments are under one roof, so it's one-stop shopping, and that's really the biggest benefit of it.

"It's so nice to have everybody back under one roof. For more than two years, we were split up at three different locations (during construction). The best part is that we are all back together again."

Hughes says that is her favorite part, as well, which helps associates collaborate and work together better for the benefit of Simmons' customers.

"The flow of the building, it helps with collaboration with all of us," said Hughes. "We are not all separated like in the past. You can walk by every office and see that associate, and it's more of an open forum to keep checking in.

"Overall, the style is modern and sophisticated, and that represents the sophisticated products we have in house. So many times in the community, you look at an old bank and you assume they do it the old way, but we are sophisticated. This beautiful new

building now reflects that and speaks volumes on that."

Bridger says the neon lights that flash and move on the exterior of the building are a popular feature, as well. He hopes they are something passersby look forward to seeing as the colors change for different seasons and special occasions, such as Christmas or breast cancer awareness.

As Simmons readies for the official Jonesboro Regional Chamber of Commerce ribbon cutting on March 12, the associates are settling in and are ready to utilize the new building for customers.

"Kent has done such a great job of facilitating an environment that is enjoyable for customers and associates and that focuses on faith, family and our work here," said Hughes. "You feel like everyone is your cheerleader, and you know you have the support when it comes to your family. We just want to do what's right for our families and our customers."

For more information about Simmons Bank, located at 1720 South Caraway Road, call (870) 933-7565 or visit [simmonsbank.com](http://simmonsbank.com).