

"Unicorn City" of the U.S. South
Bentonville, Arkansas

WASHINGTON | CORE

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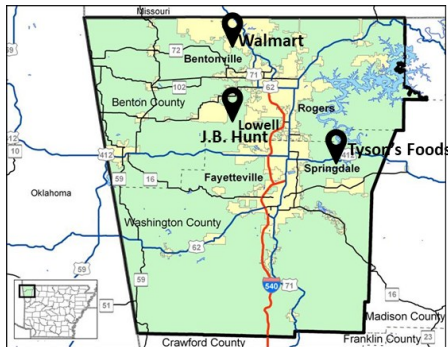
Bentonville is located in the northwestern part of the southern U.S. state of Arkansas. It is a relatively small regional city with a population of just over 60,000, known for being the headquarters of Walmart, the world's largest retailer, but in recent years it has been attracting a diverse range of industries and a rapidly growing number of new residents. We asked Brandon Gengelbach, CEO of the Bentonville Area Chamber of Commerce, who calls the city "Unicorn City," about the city's unique charm and growth potential.



THREE MAJOR COMPANIES THAT CREATED THE INDUSTRIAL BASE

Bentonville's industrial base has long been shaped by the presence of major corporations. In addition to Walmart, logistics giant J.B. Hunt and food processing leader Tyson Foods are headquartered nearby, all within a 30-minute driving distance of one another. Walmart's presence has been significant, contributing greatly to the development of supply chains and retail-related technology. An inaugural "Retail Innovation Week"¹ event for retail startups is scheduled to be held in September 2025.

Map of Northwest Arkansas and the three companies



Source: Consystec and WCORE²

What distinguishes Bentonville from other towns with major employers is the deep-rooted presence of the companies' founding families who continue to invest in the region's growth and vitality. Rather than exiting after success, these families have remained actively involved in shaping Bentonville's future through philanthropic and infrastructural investments, such as the development of the local airport to support corporate connectivity. This embedded legacy strengthens the city's ecosystem and fuels its resilience and long-term planning.

This strong employer base is also a major factor in attracting new business and talent, resulting in population growth in Northwest Arkansas. Of an estimated 36 people per day, making it the 18th fastest-growing metro in the United States.³ Bentonville, in particular, has seen a particularly

strong population influx, with a population growth rate of 3.1%⁴ in 2024 compared to the previous year. According to Gengelbach, many people are drawn to Bentonville by the high quality of life, business opportunities, and modest cost of living, a trend accelerated by the popularity of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Company Profiles

Company	HQ	Founded	Revenue	Fortune Ranking	# of Employees
Walmart	Bentonville, AK	Sam Walton, 1962	\$648.125B	#1	2.1 million
J. B Hunt	Lowell, AK	Johnnie Bryan Hunt, 1961	\$12.09B	#85	33,000
Tyson's Foods	Springdale, AK	John W. Tyson, 1935	\$1.758B	#316	138,000

Source: WCORE

INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE HEARTLAND

Bentonville has positioned itself as a powerhouse for innovation and entrepreneurship within the American heartland. As the anchor of the Northwest Arkansas region, the city has cultivated a dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem powered by strategic investments in talent, capital access, and startup infrastructure. Initiatives like The Collaborative, a University of Arkansas-led effort based in Bentonville, serve as catalysts for commercializing research, accelerating startups, and advancing workforce development in strategic sectors. Meanwhile, an expanding network of entrepreneurial support organizations, including Startup Junkie and Endeavor, offer free mentorship, consulting, and scaling resources to emerging innovators.

In this collaborative environment, Bentonville is becoming more than just the hometown of Walmart; it is redefining itself as a serious contender in the global innovation economy.

One example of this thriving entrepreneurial spirit is Game Aero, a locally founded aerospace startup that

build firefighting aircraft, reflecting Bentonville's growing diversification beyond retail and supply chain technology. Unlike existing single-engine firebombers that began as agricultural airplanes, Game Aero's Gamebird 2 is the first purpose built firefighting airplane in the U.S., specifically designed for the challenging operational environment found around wildfires. Game Aero is co-owned by Stuart Walton, a former Walmart executive and Bentonville civic booster.⁵

Gamebird 2



Source: GameAero⁶

MOUNTAIN BIKING SANCTUARY

The region has a number of high-quality mountain bike trails and trails that take advantage of the terrain and attract cyclists from around the country and abroad. The Bentonville Bike Fest,⁷ considered an annual "celebration of bicycle culture" has been held annually since 2021. The event features mountain bike exhibits, test rides, races, and other events led by bicycle-related businesses and others from the city and beyond. As Gengelbach proudly states, "Bentonville has truly become known as a 'mecca' for mountain biking."

Teams USA Parade



Source: Drager Creative⁸

Biking has grown to be more than just a recreational hobby for Bentonville residents. There is now a concentration of bicycle-related industries providing employment. Bicycle paths and other infrastructure have been developed, and many people commute by bicycle. The strong local biking culture is appealing to job candidates for the major employers in the area.

Beyond biking, outdoor activities such as hiking and kayaking have also become part of residents' lifestyles. In addition, the local University of Arkansas operates an incubation program for outdoor-related startups called "GORP" (Greenhouse Outdoor Recreation Program).⁹ This vibrant outdoor sporting culture embodies the city's appeal as a place where "Life, Work, and Play," as Mr. Gengelbach emphasizes, come together.

Sustainability also plays a vital role in the city's development ethos. With its strong focus on mobility and green infrastructure, Bentonville is actively working toward goals like having 10% of Walmart's workforce commute via alternative transportation such as bikes or scooters.

NICHE AND DIVERSITY, APPEAL TO YOUTH

Gengelbach emphasizes that the main focus of the Bentonville Area Chamber's growth strategy is not to rely on or attract large companies, saying, "We are not necessarily trying to attract the 'big fish'. Rather, he said, the city is building on its unique strengths by focusing on niche areas that fill gaps in existing industries. Good examples include the outdoor sports sector, retail tech, and the supply chain-related software industry, which is also attracting startup companies.

These niche strategies are attracting younger talent with diverse backgrounds, ideas and skills. According to Gengelbach, the Bentonville population is very young and educated and is giving the city a new vitality. The median age of Bentonville residents is 33.6, well below the national average of 39.3, and 57.3% of the population is millennial, which is significantly higher than the U.S. average of 47.24%. Additionally, 59.01% of residents hold an associate's degree or higher, far exceeding the national average of 46.26%, highlighting the city's strong educational profile and its ability to attract well-educated professionals.

A UNICORN IN THE ROUGH

Bentonville is a city that is actively incorporating new things into its urban development while building on its old foundations. There are many wonderful small business cities in the fly over states area, often overlooked in favor of well known innovation hubs like Boston and Silicon Valley. Bentonville's unique community of people from different backgrounds and diverse industries who inspire each other is the main reason Mr. Gengelbach calls it the "Unicorn City." With its diversity of ideas and people, it is likely to continue to make great strides in the future, just like a unicorn.

Springtime in Bentonville



Source: Drager Creative⁸

Endnote

1. <https://www.embarksummit.com/retail-innovation-week>
2. https://www.consystec.com/arkansas/nwark/web/_regionhome.htm
3. <https://www.nwahomepage.com/news/northwest-arkansas-predicted-to-reach-one-million-people-by-2050/>
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6. <https://game.aero/gb2/>
7. <https://www.bentonvillebikefest.com/>
8. <https://www.dragercreative.com/>
9. <https://entrepreneurship.uark.edu/programs/greenhouseoutdoorincubator.php>



Interviewee

Brandom Gengelbach assumed the role of President and CEO of the Bentonville Area Chamber of Commerce in October 2023, bringing with him more than 20 years of expertise in economic development and chamber leadership. With a proven track record in driving regional economic growth, Brandom is deeply committed to growing the Bentonville area and Northwest Arkansas economy and creating economic prosperity for all.

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Folake Amoda, Researcher



Folake Amoda has been engaged in a wide range of research activities, including infrastructure-related studies, decarbonization projects, and advanced technology fields. She recently conducted research focusing on economic security. In projects involving expert interviews across various infrastructure sectors—such as railways, connected cars, ports, and ships—she has provided support from multiple angles, including drafting questions, negotiating with key opinion leaders (KOLs), and conducting interviews. She graduated from University of Georgia with a degree in International Affairs.