

*An Illustrated History
of the
Rock Island Arsenal
and
Arsenal Island*



Parts One - Three



United States Army Sustainment Command History Office

Foreword to “An Illustrated History of the Rock Island Arsenal and Arsenal Island, Parts One – Three”

Since Lieutenant Zebulon Pike first reported this place in 1805, Arsenal Island has been central to the American development of the Quad Cities area as a place for settlers, farmers, transporters, and industrialists. Long before Pike arrived the local Native American tribes, primarily Sauk and Fox, centered their tribal areas on Rock Island. In fact, as noted in Part One of this history, by the time Pike arrived the Sauk and Fox were already hostile to the Americans due to actions in the Revolutionary War and the 1804 treaty that ceded some 50 million acres, including Rock Island, to the United States. These already negative relations drove the history of the area until the mid 1830s. After 1835 relations between the United States and the Native Americans became a memory while the role of the mighty Mississippi regained center place. It was the use of the river for transportation that attracted fur traders and later cargo and passenger river boats; the water and the land that attracted settlers and farmers and soldiers; it was the power potential of the river that attracted industry and mills; and it was the need to span the river that led to the first bridge over the Mississippi in 1856. The river drew Americans to Rock Island and then, in the late 1850s encouraged the Army to create an armory and later an arsenal that could exploit the river and the island.

Parts One and Two of this history tell the tale of Rock Island Arsenal and Arsenal Island from pre-history through the establishment and construction of the Arsenal and then the role the Arsenal played in the Spanish American War. The first two parts, written in 1988 and 1990, end in 1908 when the Arsenal had weathered its first wartime test. While a third volume was planned, for a variety of reasons it was never completed. For the past several years I have been chagrined whenever presentation copies of Parts One and Two were given to visiting dignitaries as a souvenir of their visit. I knew that the real contributions of Rock Island Arsenal to the Army and Soldiers were made in World War I, World War Two, Korea, and beyond. I knew that the character of Arsenal Island changed forever when in 1955 the first general officer led higher command arrived on Arsenal Island to take up residence as a tenant and presaged the shift from pure manufacturing to the modern Federal office complex and manufacturing site. Just as circumstances precluded Tom Slattery from adding a third volume, efforts to bring this history forward foundered on resource availability. Finally, this summer I determined to let some other projects rest and put the efforts of the entire staff, led by Lisa Wallace, to bring this history forward to the point in time when the Ordnance Weapons Command arrived in 1955 and complete the history of an independent Rock Island Arsenal.

One of the first difficulties encountered once we started Part 3 was realizing that we had no electronic editable copy of the Parts One and Two. The type had grown faded and many pictures had lost their detail from multiple copying passes. This “Illustrated History of the Rock Island Arsenal and Arsenal Island, Parts One- Three” has been completely reproduced. The text was reentered, original pictures found and scanned, and content edited to correct errors and bring it in line with current usage and interpretation. The vast majority of the pictures are the same as in the original Parts One and Two, although in some cases we substituted when we could not find the original or found a better picture. In Part Three we worked to maintain much of the style of the first two parts and were helped when we found Tom Slattery’s contribution to the 50th anniversary of World War II. The rest is the original research and writing of a talented group of interns, old timers, museum curators, and archivists.

I want to thank Lisa Wallace, Alex Cahill, and the rest of the ASC History Office for their efforts in writing this volume. I also want to thank the Rock Island Arsenal Museum staff for supporting the effort by finding pictures and research materials as well as their review and encouragement. Finally, I want to thank the Army Sustainment Command leadership for supporting the effort as well as prodding for a completed product. I will feel much better when this updated history is presented knowing that the core of the Arsenal story has been told.

As you read this history I hope you will reflect on the critical contributions of Arsenal Island and the people who worked here to not only the local area, but also to the Army in peace and war. I also hope this leaves you wanting more as we fully intend to complete the story through 2006 in the near future.

George Eaton
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