

**Sandwiching in History**  
**1836 U.S. Arsenal building**  
**December 6, 2019**  
**By John Hoganson**



**Introduction:**

Hello, my name is Callie Williams and I am the Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of the 1836 U.S. Arsenal Building here in MacArthur Park. This tour is worth one hour of continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects, if you would like to receive this credit, please see me or one of my colleague after the tour to complete a short survey.

Much of this tour script was research and written by John Hoganson, our Graduate Assistant who helped us out on many projects during the spring of 2019. Also, I would like to thank the staff at the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History for their help with today's tour.

The arsenal building is one of the oldest buildings still standing in central Arkansas and we are happy we can showcase this important local landmark today. The Arsenal building, also known as the tower building due to its large central tower, was built from 1836 to 1840, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. It was then recognized as a National Historic

Landmark in 1994 for its role as an important site of organization and planning during the Camden Expedition during the spring of 1864.

### **History of the Arsenal:**

Although there had been much discussion of a military arsenal in Arkansas Territory prior to 1836, nearly immediately after Arkansas achieved statehood Governor James Sevier Conway contacted the Federal government with a fervent request to establish an official Arsenal in Little Rock as soon as possible. Sevier pleaded with the War Department for some sort of military garrison, noting that the area was in need of protection as a frontier settlement. The Federal Government sent a Lieutenant F. L. Jones of the Army to select a site that would serve as the new arsenal grounds. He chose a site which at the time was a racetrack for the local Jockey Club. Soon, 36 acres were acquired and John W. Walker, a builder employed by the Federal government, was sent from Baton Rouge, where he had already supervised the construction of an early arsenal, to Little Rock. Walker served as supervisor and master builder on the new arsenal construction projects. According to surviving documents, he liked the Little Rock area and decided to settle there and start a family. The Arsenal building was completed in 1840 at a cost of around \$30,000, which was \$16,000 more than originally allocated for the project.

The main central building, which was often referred to as the tower building, was originally designed to store ammunition, and was built with very thick walls, including the basement and first floor exterior walls that measure almost 4 feet thick and the upper story with walls over 2.5 feet thick. Also, the original beams that supported the building measured 14 inches by 14 inches. While much of the brick for the building is local, possibly produced in the brickyards of Thomas Thorn, who also produced brick for the Old State House, the timber used in the construction of this building is thought to have come from near Pine Bluff.

During the following decade, over thirty (30) buildings were added to the site; including officers' quarters, various barracks, a hospital, and several service and storage buildings.

### **Civil War**

When South Carolina seceded in November of 1860, the Federal Government moved to secure the Arsenal in Little Rock by sending a company of Artillery, around 65 men, of the Second United States Artillery under the command of Captain James Totten. As soon as the Federal troops arrived in Little Rock, various local leaders from across the state urged then Governor Henry Rector to seize the Arsenal and the weapons stored there before more Federal troops were stationed in the area. Rumors of the advance of Federal forces towards Little Rock soon had waves of volunteers arriving in the city eager to seize the arsenal. The Governor, in an effort to avoid bloodshed and violence, approached Captain Totten to surrender the garrison. With growing secessionist feeling in the city, and a lack of orders from the Federal capitol in Washington, D.C., Captain Totten surrendered and evacuated the Arsenal in early February of 1860. Captain Totten would leave without taking any of the ordnance stored within the Arsenal, this meant that around 10,000 arms fell into the hands of the State of Arkansas. While paused at the bank of the Arkansas River, awaiting their steamer bound for St. Louis, Captain Totten was presented with a sword by the ladies of Little Rock in recognition of his bravery and honor in preventing bloodshed in their city. Without the level headed determination of Governor Rector and Captain Totten, this site may have served as the first bloody battle of the Civil War. Instead, Fort Sumter is noted as the first battle of the Civil War, just two months after the Little Rock Arsenal Crisis.

With the secession of Arkansas in May of 1861 and the beginning of hostilities between the Union and Confederacy, the Arsenal came under control of the new Confederate government and was used as a supply base for the Trans-Mississippi region. With the defeat of Confederate General Van Dorn in the Battle of Pea Ridge, Van Dorn stripped much of the arms and machinery of the Arsenal in his retreat across the Mississippi River in 1862. Much of this equipment was never accounted for and is likely to have been captured or destroyed in the siege of Vicksburg.

In May of 1862, the Confederate military in Arkansas, along with the Arsenal, was placed under the command of Major General Thomas C. Hindman, who started the process to bring the Little Rock Arsenal back into working order. He found moderate success and the Little Rock Arsenal

was deemed a “Confederate Ordnance Station” in September of 1862, though a new arsenal was planned in Arkadelphia. The Arsenal contained equipment for the manufacture of arms and ammunition along with the means to repair weapons damaged in combat.

In less than a year Little Rock would fall to Union forces, who occupied the city and Arsenal in August of 1863. Confederate production of arms and ammunition shifted to Arkadelphia and eventually moved into Texas. Union forces would use the Arsenal as a staging ground for the Camden Expedition, a failed attempt by the Union to separate Texas from the rest of the Confederacy. Throughout the rest of the war, and until the inauguration of the reconstructed state government, the Arsenal would remain a powerful symbol of the Union authority in the state.

### **Post-Civil War**

With the end of the Civil War the Arsenal would mostly return to its pre-war status as a secondary facility. Soon after the war, the Tower Building was converted from an arms warehouse into living quarters for married officers and their families, this changed the interior layout of the original building. Prior to the renovations, a rear basement door had provided the only entrance and the tower itself had served as a hoist space to move munitions between floors. Also, it is likely that the original building didn't have the expansive two-story porches you see now. By 1868, the front and rear porches had been added, as well as several new interior walls and the grand central staircase that still survives. In 1873, the site was renamed the Little Rock Barracks and continued to be used as a military post. During the 1870s and 1880s, local newspapers reported the numerous baseball games played between the soldiers and local teams. During the 1870s, the post was described in official reports as including five large brick buildings; including the arsenal building, the commanding officer's quarters, a company barracks, ordnance storage building, and a commissary building. There was also a magazine, a brick stable, and outhouses, as well as at least nine wood-frame barracks buildings that had been recently moved from the Little Rock General Hospital grounds. Also during the 1870s, it was reported that the general strength of the post was around 480 men.

One notable event that occurred in the Arsenal building during this time was the birth of future General Douglas MacArthur on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1880. At the time, his father Captain Arthur MacArthur, was stationed here as part of the 13<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army Infantry. Arthur MacArthur and his wife and children lived in quarters at the Tower Building. The MacArthur family would only be in Arkansas for a few more months before leaving for another post and Douglas would not return to the state until after the end of his long military career, which included distinguished service during World War I, command of United States troops in the Pacific during World War II, and the administration of the rebuilding of Japan's government after their surrender in 1945. As his birthplace and in recognition of his military achievements, the city of Little Rock renamed City Park MacArthur Park in 1942. In 1952, General MacArthur finally returned to Little Rock, Arkansas, to participate in ceremonies celebrating his life and military career.

### **City Park**

During the 1880s and 1890s, the United States military looked to downsize their arsenal system while also focusing any new facility around existing rail systems, this led to the downsizing of the Little Rock Barracks and the eventual closing of the Barracks in 1890. On April 23, 1892, the arsenal and grounds were traded by the Federal government for 1000 acres north of the Arkansas River which would be developed as Fort Roots. The trade stipulated that the former military grounds were to be "forever exclusively devoted to uses and purpose of a public park." All of the military buildings, except the brick tower building, were dismantled and sold, leaving this building as the last surviving remnant of the Little Rock Arsenal. During the 1960s, while doing research on the history of the arsenal, James Eison, then curator of the Museum of Natural History, noted that several of the wood-framed buildings from the arsenal grounds had been purchased by locals who moved the building to lots in the surrounding neighborhood and turned them into houses. He was able to find three such buildings that still stood in 1964 near the intersection of 13<sup>th</sup> and commerce Streets. Unfortunately, those three houses were demolished around 1965.

The tradeoff of land with the US Military ensured that the former Arsenal grounds were to be used as Little Rock's first city park. However while the land was used as a popular city park, the

tower building itself would fall into a state of disrepair. After the abandonment of the property by the Army, the building was used for a time by the Arkansas Columbian Exposition Commission, who furnished the Arkansas Building at the Columbian Exposition World's Fair in Chicago. They soon invited the Little Rock Aesthetic Club, which was formed in 1885 and is one of the oldest, still meeting women's clubs west of the Mississippi River, to meet in the Columbian Art Memorial Room in the building. By 1917, the Columbian Commission was dissolved and their art, furniture pieces, and funds were transferred to the Aesthetic Club, who continued to meet in the Arsenal building. Also, one of the largest events ever hosted at the Arsenal Building was the United Confederate Veterans Reunion in 1911 which was a gathering of over 100,000 visitors including nearly 15,000 Civil War veterans who used the park and the tower building for their events. Unfortunately, time had not been kind to the building and deferred maintenance and deterioration from the last 50 years seriously affected the building by the 1930s. Sometime during the 1910s and 1920s, the building's large porches had been removed. The building was surveyed by the Historic American Building Survey in 1933 and at that time, the building had only a one story porch on either side.

An interesting side note: A Y-shaped underground series of tunnels were rumored to exist under the arsenal building, stretching from the arsenal to the hospital and barracks buildings and possibly to a nearby house where the arsenal's doctor resided in the 1870s. Early curators at the Museum of Natural History and newspaper reports noted that old-timers often claimed to have visited the tunnels as children or shortly after the Civil War. These accounts helped to feed rumors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; until the late 1960s, when engineers of the Soil Conservation Service eventually turned up evidence on the site of some sort of unusual void at the southeast corner of the building. Further research and happenstance also may have uncovered underground constructions in 1981 when a construction worker accidentally discovered a branch of some kind of tunnel near the tennis courts. Although several eye-witness accounts note the construction of tunnels on the property, no official record has ever been found that states anything about the construction of tunnels on the arsenal grounds.

In the late 1930s, Works Progress Administration labor was used to transform the building into the new location for the Museum of Natural History and Antiquities. The WPA workers helped

to install new plumbing, lighting, and other improvements. The Museum of Natural History and Antiquities was founded by local author and civic leader Bernie Babcock in 1927. The city acquired the museum, with Ms. Babcock as its first curator, in 1929, and the museum was installed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of city hall. One of the most popular early exhibits was supposedly the “head of a Chicago Criminal.” In 1942, the museum and Ms. Babcock were moved to the Arsenal Building, where she would live in part of the first floor in exchange for taking care of the museum until 1953. She was also instrumental in the renaming of the park after General MacArthur during the 1940s. In 1964, the museum became the Museum of Science and Natural History, and the word Arkansas was added to the name in 1983. In 1998, the museum became the Museum of Discovery and reopened in its current location in the Little Rock River-market.

During the 1960s and 1970s, local historians despaired of ever finding earlier historical records of the building of the Arsenal Building since attempts to find military records of the site were met with responses noting that official records from the National Archives had been “misplaced or destroyed.” Finally, copies of early military records were discovered in an archive in St. Louis and copies were requested in 1974. Interestingly, an unusual experiment was devised while these records were being copied and dispatched to Little Rock. According to a report in the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program’s files, unknown members of the Museum of Science and History board contacted the local Institute of Physic Sciences on Broadway in Little Rock and were put in touch with a Ms. Sara Elizabeth Cran, a New York trained physic, and then living in Heber Springs. She agreed to conduct a séance at the Arsenal Building on January 31, 1975, which was attended by at least 10 people that lasted from 11:15 pm until 2am the next morning. The results of her séance were hoped to be compared to the historic records that were soon to be on their way. Unfortunately no records of the results of the séance have been discovered so far.

In May of 2001 the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History opened in the building with the goal of “interpreting our state's military heritage from its territorial period to the present” This opening was delayed by a storm system that hit the Little Rock area with a tornado which damaged the tower building in January 1999, requiring \$250,000 in repairs. The MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History continues in operation today with an extensive

collection of artifacts, photographs, weapons, documents, uniforms, and other military items that help to portray the important legacy of service and sacrifice in Arkansas's military history.

Thanks to recent grants from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, the Tower Building has recently undergone renovation in order to update the HVAC system, window repairs and restorations, and repairs and restorations to the outer porches of the building.

This concludes the Sandwiching in History Tour of the 1836 U.S. Arsenal building. Again, I'd like to thank you all for coming and feel free to enjoy MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History today. A staff member of the museum is available to guide you through their current exhibits or you may visit at your own pace. Admission to the museum is free, but donations are appreciated.

Our next Sandwiching in History tour will be at Barton Coliseum at the Arkansas State Fair Grounds on Friday, January 10<sup>th</sup> at Noon. We also have brochures for all of next year's Sandwiching and Walks Tours, please be sure to grab one and join us throughout 2020 as we explore more interesting historic sites throughout central Arkansas.

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