

Rock Island Arsenal Historical Tour

- When conducting a driving tour of RIA, use hazard lights
- Start at Building 350, take Rodman Avenue (West) towards Davenport gate
- Pull over briefly across from JMTC buildings

Point out shop buildings.

To your left are various shop buildings for JMTC. In WWI we had a major construction boom and then a smaller boom during WWII. The first two buildings were built in 1918 and 1943. In the 1980s a major effort was made to modernize the plant. They joined the WWI and WWII buildings and built a new art shop and foundry. Until then the old 1880s shops still held the foundry. The new construction was completed in 1988, just before the end of the Cold War.

- Continue driving west down Rodman

On the right, we have several World War I era warehouses. The recreation rental facility, the PX and Commissary, were converted from similar warehouse space.

- Pull into the Lock and Dam Visitor Center parking lot, facing the Davenport Gate/Clock Tower

Begin story of War of 1812, Black Hawk War, Clock Tower

The history of the Arsenal goes to the early 1800s. The War of 1812 saw some naval skirmishes in the area that led the Army to build Fort Armstrong on the island. The fort was here on the Davenport end of the island. It had about 300 soldiers and was key to populating the area as it served as protection and a trading post for settlers. During the Black Hawk War Ft Armstrong was a major logistics and administrative center. After the war, the Army abandoned the fort.

The pile of cannonballs next to the sidewalk marks the NE corner of the fort. The NW corner was near the bridge building on the other side of the gate. If you look over the rail embankment you can see the top of the replica blockhouse. That replica was built in 1816 for the 100th anniversary of Fort Armstrong. Remember that before the lock and dam was built in the early 1930s, the water level was 15-20 feet lower than it is today. Fort Armstrong only had three walls. The bluff at the tip of the island protected it from assault from the river.

Discuss Ft Armstrong, Clock Tower

In front of us is the Clock Tower Building. When Maj. Kingsbury arrived in 1862 his first step was to construct a warehouse for the armory. He built a 3-story warehouse and administration building, the first permanent stone building on the island. The tower was built to house the elevator and counterweight system. Later General Rodman decided to add a clock to make the tower more functional. For most of the late 19th century, the clock bells regulated the day for the downtown communities.

- Left (East) on Rodman Avenue
- Left on Bike path
- Pull over just after taking the right fork towards the Davenport House

Discuss Davenport, Bridges

In the 1840s not a single bridge crossed the Mississippi River. Riverboats were king. Anything crossing the river had to pay boatmen to ferry them across.

In 1845, island resident George Davenport hosted a meeting in his house with executives from the Chicago-Rock Island- and Pacific RR company. They decided to build a bridge here because the bridging river would be easier if they utilized the island, plus the shallow water allowed for easier construction of piers. Colonel Davenport died later that year, but he got the idea started and in April 1856 the first bridge anywhere over the Mississippi was built here not coincidentally along Colonel Davenport's property line.

To your left is first foundation pier. The bridge landed on the Iowa side at 4th and River Drive. The bridge had a rotating span in the middle of the channel. Two weeks after the bridge opened it was hit – most likely deliberately – by the riverboat Effie Afton. The boat and the bridge both caught fire. The bridge was soon rebuilt, but the riverboat interests initiated a lengthy series of court cases, at one point including young lawyer Abraham Lincoln. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled that riverboats had no right to stop bridges from being built.

After the Effie Afton incident, the original bridge was rebuilt two more times on the original site. Even so, by the 1870s, the bridge was obsolete and the Army wanted it moved to make room for Arsenal expansion. An iron bridge opened in 1872, on the site of the current bridge. It had two decks with the rail line on top and road traffic on the bottom. By the 1890s, that bridge was also obsolete and so a final bridge, using the 1872 piers, opened in 1896. The turntable was beefed up for more weight and equipped with streetcar tracks. That 1896 bridge is the one still in use today.

- Drive to Davenport House; stop short of the road entrance on your right.

Discuss Davenport House

Ahead of us is the George Davenport House. He was a British sailor who became an American citizen and joined the Army before becoming a fur trader and sutler (supplier) for the army, providing food during the construction of Ft. Armstrong. He built a double log cabin on the island to serve as a home and trading post. With the movement of the Indians west, the fur trade ended and Davenport became involved in developing the area (he had purchased a lot of land). He constructed this house in 1833; it was the first frame construction house in the Quad Cities area. The city of Davenport is named for him. He was murdered in this house in 1845 on the 4th of July, while his family was off celebrating the holiday.

- Exit to the service road. Follow the road to the East behind the warehouses, Building 350, and Building 390.

Warehouses

South of us is the backside of the World War I warehouses. These structures initially stored excess ordnance material, primarily artillery components and rifles. As time went on the Arsenal saw more and more materiel sent here for storage, requiring more warehouses. Most of them have been torn down.

Building 350

The big gray structure is Building 350. Built in 1918 as a 6-story parts warehouse, it was converted to offices in the late 1960s, remodeled in the 1980s, and just got new windows a few years ago. It houses the Joint Munitions Command HQ and some Army Sustainment command personnel.

Building 390

Next is the more modern Building 390 on the right. This dates from WWII, when it was built to house the headquarters for the Arsenal. In the 1960s, it became home to the highest-level command on the island, which today is the Army Sustainment Command.

Backside of Old HQ Building

Building 360 on the right was an early HQ Building for the garrison. It was later converted for both offices and housing. The Arsenal garrison staff is now housed in Building 90, the old stone barracks on East Avenue.

- Stop at the corner of North and Gillespie.

This is the north end of the original shops designed by General Rodman, which I'll talk more about later. For now, I wanted to point out the Rock Island Arsenal Museum and Research facility, which is housed here at the rear of Building 60. They have examples of every handheld weapon ever manufactured on the island, as well as various other displays about the history of the island in general. I encourage you to make time to visit the museum.

- Turn north on Gillespie and pull over across from the Golf Club.

Discuss POW Camp

Rock Island Arsenal was officially established in 1862, the same year construction began on the Clock Tower. Little was accomplished during the Civil War, due to the resources focused on maintaining the POW camp.

Along the northern shore of the island, from here to the river and extending to our right across this end of the golf course, is where the Rock Island Prison Barracks sat from December 1863 to July 1865. During the twenty months of its operation, the prison camp held more than 12,000 Confederate soldiers. The facility consisted of 84 wooden barracks structures surrounded by a 12-foot high stockade fence.

There were 41 successful escapes, mainly by digging under the fence or crawling through the sewer system. Any prisoner caught escaping risked being shot. There are

1,964 Confederate prisoners and 125 Union guards buried on the island; most died from small pox and other diseases.

On December 8, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued an Amnesty Proclamation. Any prisoner who pledged allegiance to the United States and agreed to enlist in Union military, was granted amnesty and inducted into the Navy or Army for service in the West. Approximately 3,000 Rock Island prisoners became “Galvanized Yankees.”

Golf Club

Today, the prison site is home to part of the Rock Island Arsenal Golf Course. The golf course was established by COL Blount, Arsenal Commander, in 1894. From 1902 until 2010 this was a private golf course leased from the Arsenal. It is operated by the arsenal and open to the public. The clubhouse is on the left.

- Pull into driveway of Quarters One.

Quarters One

This is Quarters One. It was the home of the senior ranking commander on the island from 1871 until 2008, when the last commander moved out. It was the largest residence in the Army and second largest in the federal inventory after the White House. Prior to this building, there was an old two-story frame quarters on the site.

Construction of Quarters One began in 1870 under Brevet Brigadier General Thomas Rodman, who died on 7 June 1871, four months before its completion. Major Daniel Flagler directed the completion of the landscaping in Spring 1872. The house contains over 20,000 square feet and 50 rooms – 12 on the first and second floors, 10 on the third and 16 in the basement, including the original kitchen and a courtroom. It is an Italian Villa design, made of Joliet limestone two feet thick.

The iron fence, with golden eagle decorations, forged iron grillwork on the wraparound porches, as well as all of the hinges, doorknobs and fixture plates inside were forged on the Arsenal. In addition, much of the woodwork and some of the furniture you’ll see inside were made in the Arsenal shops. The ironwork came from melted down cannonballs. The brass fixtures came from excess civil war ammunition.

There used to be a garden teahouse on the lawn over the river. It was built in 1898. After years of ice damage made the structure unsafe, it was torn down in 1927.

South of the house is a working fountain. It was not in use from 1977 to 1997, when it was refurbished. To the right of the fountain stood a rose garden. Gardener’s house and shed still stand, but there is no gardener and no garden to tend. An exterior patio in the rear held a large conservatory from 1905 until 1979. You can see the marks from the old roof. The conservatory eventually contained plants from around the world. It cost a lot to keep the room heated all year. At one point they even burned the prized 1903 Springfield rifle stocks. Lack of funds led to the elimination of the structure.

General Rodman took command of the Arsenal in 1865 and started planning improvements. He was here as punishment. While commander at Watertown Arsenal he had been charged with disloyalty and mismanagement. Most importantly, he was

investigated for overspending on a lavish residence, the 10,000 square foot Quarters One. So, they sent him to the edge of the frontier to teach him a lesson, whereupon he proceeded to build a house twice as big as the one at Watertown.

He wanted Quarters One to serve as a diplomatic center for visiting dignitaries, as there was no hotel sufficient to house them in the area. Rodman also foresaw using the house as temporary barracks for officers. To protect himself, he used labor and facilities from the island – stoneworkers, woodworkers, metalworkers, to hide the construction costs. As a result, we have no idea what he spent on the building.

Contact the JMC or ASC history offices if you would like to arrange a tour of the building.

- Exit the driveway, turning left (south) on Gillespie and right (east) on Terrace Drive (or you can use Blunt Road if river levels allow it)

While driving discuss subaltern quarters

This area is what we call Colonels row. These homes were built three years after Quarters One. Back then, there were not many hotels in the area, so traveling military officers would lodge in these homes, four or five soldiers per house. Right now the different Colonels and Generals that have commands here live in the houses.

The river looked much different when these houses were built. The Rock Island Rapids was the most treacherous part of the river between St Paul and New Orleans and stretched 10 miles from the foot of the island and upriver to LeClaire. It was always a hindrance to river traffic. In July and August, the water would be so low that you had to portage from here to LeClaire.

- Follow the river around back to Rodman Avenue

While driving discuss general RIA history, Sac and Fox, water power, Rodman and plan for arsenal – 10 stone shops and support structures

We've mostly seen Civil War era structures, but as I suggested, the Army's contact with Arsenal Island started much earlier. Zebulon Pike actually arrived here in 1805 and wrote that the island would make a good military site. However, nothing happened with that early recommendation, as there was no pressing need to build here.

The Sac and Fox tribes had been in the area since the early 1700s. In 1805, they sold 55 million acres to the US in a contested treaty. One native group opposed the treaty and later sided with the British in the War of 1812. Two battles were fought in the area - the Battle of Campbell's Island and the Battle of Credit Island. In both cases, US forces fought disgruntled Sac and Fox Indians backed by the British. After the War of 1812, the US decided to build Fort Armstrong in 1816, to keep an eye on the natives.

The leader of native opposition was Black Hawk, who lived at the village of Saukenuk on the Rock River, centered on the Rock Island side of the 11th Street bridge to Milan. In 1832, he started the Black Hawk War in an effort to recapture lost lands. The war was a disaster for the Sac and Fox. Of the 1300 who joined Black Hawk, only 300

survived. Afterwards, new treaties forced all tribes out of Illinois. By 1836, there was no further threat and so the army abandoned Fort Armstrong.

In the Civil War era, the Army decided to build an expanded arsenal on the island. The original plan was merely for an armory, but after the loss of Harper's Ferry in 1862, the Army needed a new manufacturing facility and so expanded its plans for Rock Island. Key to this was the availability of water power and transportation. The slough between the Island and Illinois provided all the water power needed and attracted the Army, just as it had earlier attracted manufacturers like John Deere. The crossroads of the river and railroad took care of transportation.

- Pull into the Federal Cemetery, follow the road to the east end and pull over.

Federal Cemetery

There are more than 120 National Cemeteries. In size, this one stands somewhere around #25. The earliest cemetery was established in 1863 near the present-day shops to bury Union guards who died while working at the Prison Camp. By 1868, the cemetery contained 136 graves. General Rodman arrived on the island in 1865 and designed the 10 massive shop buildings we will soon see. These plans required a new burial site. The old remains were moved here along with some from a Davenport cemetery. The site has expanded over the years and now includes more than 31 acres.

Point out Rodman tomb

To your right are two tombs. The small one is for COL King, who served nearly a dozen years as the Arsenal commander. The larger tomb is General Rodman's. The large cannon are part of his legacy. He was a leading engineer who designed a new, safe way of casting large artillery guns, and made innovations to gunpowder.

Rodman has the biggest legacy on the island, as the builder of Quarters One and the designer of the main shops. The 10 shops are massive U-shaped buildings, each covering about an acre. Rear support buildings were planned for each shop, but many were never constructed. Shop construction started in 1866 and was completed in 1893. It was the largest American public works project in the 19th century.

- Continue right (west) down Rodman towards the Confederate Cemetery.

Behind the woods to your left is a test track left over from when we designed tanks here prior to WWII. The houses to your right are for military families assigned to the arsenal.

- Pull over across from the Confederate Cemetery

Confederate Cemetery.

This cemetery holds the remains of over 1200 confederate POWs. The US Army did not pay to have remains shipped home and most families could not afford to do so. The headstones were added in the early 1900s under the direction of the Daughters of the Confederacy. Each stone has the name, unit and date of death.

- Continue down Rodman Avenue and point out the front of the shops as you turn left (south) on East Street.

Ahead of us now are the 10 great stone shops. This is a National Historic Area. From here you can see just how big they are. If you walked down Rodman and counted, you wouldn't count 10 buildings – several were joined together in WWI to improve efficiency.

- Pull over short of the corner of East Street and South Avenue.

On the south side of the island, a dam was built in 1872 to provide power. This was pre-electricity, so water was used to turn wheels, like a flour mill. The dam was converted to electricity around 1904 and still provides 25% of the island's power. In 1872, a series of towers ran up the hill to the shops. The towers held wheels that turned leather straps. These straps powered the machinery inside the shops. The power house burned in 1903 at which point the system was converted to electricity.

- Turn right (west) on South Avenue

On the walls here you can still see the I-beams that held the wheels for the power belts. As we drive down the street, you can see the inside of the U shape behind each building, designed to let more light into the shops and allow work in the courtyard. The tall chimney on the north side is shorter now. General Rodman designed the smoke from the blacksmith forges to flow through underground flues. The chimney had to be over 100 feet tall to provide the proper draft.

- Stop at the corner of Gillespie and South

To our left across Gillespie, the mostly glass structure is Building 250. The Arsenal only manufactured ammunition during WWI. This plant manufactured 155mm artillery shells. The glass let in light and would blow out first in case of an explosion, to save the walls. There were a few minor explosions during WWI. Further south is Building 299, a warehouse built during WWII. At the time, it was the largest ordnance warehouse in the world with enough space inside to hold 18 football fields.

- Turn right (north) on Gillespie and left (west) on Rodman Avenue

To our left is the police and fire station – the older building has been a public safety facility since the 1874. On our right is the front of Building 360, the old HQ building. Ceremonies are occasionally held on the lawn, and this is the official flag for the installation. Here's the newly remodeled front of Building 390 ,and we're back at 350.