

**Sandwiching in History
Arkansas Ordnance Plant Guard House at
The Jacksonville Museum of Military History
100 Veterans Circle, Jacksonville
May 6, 2017
By Revis Edmonds**



Good afternoon, my name is Revis Edmonds, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Arkansas Ordnance Plant Guard House at The Jacksonville Museum of Military History. I’d like to thank Danna Kay Duggar of the Jacksonville Museum of Military History for allowing us to tour this amazing piece of Jacksonville’s history! Also, be sure to sign the museum’s guestbook at the reception desk before you leave.

This tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you're interested.

The Arkansas Ordnance Plant Guard House is one of the few remaining structures of the ordinance plant, a part of which was located on the grounds of the Jacksonville Museum of Military History in Jacksonville. According to the National Register nomination, it is a square wood-frame structure measuring 9 by 9 by 12 and mounted on metal skids for ease of relocation. It is presently mounted on a concrete pad to the right of the main museum building, believed to be not far from its original location. It was built in 1941 as part of the facilities of the World War II-era Arkansas Ordnance Plant, a facility that produced fuses and detonators in Jacksonville and once covered over 7000 acres¹ that was purchased from Harvey Land in 1941.² The exterior walls were sheathed in 1 'x 2' asbestos shingles and the roof is covered in diamond-shaped asbestos shingles. The use of eight 2'x 4' windows, all of which are double-hung, wood-framed, two-over-two, gave a panoramic view to anyone from inside the building. After the war it was moved to 1112 MacArthur Drive, and it was moved to the museum in 2006.³ It was added to the National Register on September 20, 2006.

During World War II, Arkansas was home to six ordnance plants. The sites were located near Jacksonville (Pulaski County), Marche (Pulaski County), Hope (Hempstead County), El Dorado (Union County), Pine Bluff (Jefferson County),

¹ Site Visit, museum exhibit, and discussion with Danna Kay Duggar, Museum director, April 5, 2017.

² Discussion with descendant of Harvey Land, Dibrell House tour, April 7, 2017.

³ National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Arkansas Ordnance Plant Guard House." September 20, 2006.

and Camden (Ouachita County).⁴ According to Carolyn Yancey Kent , the uses for the locations included the manufacture of detonators, fuses, primers and bombs; proving grounds for testing munitions; rocket loading, testing and storage; and producing chemical agents needed in bombs and explosives. Four of the plants were government owned and contractor operated (GOCO). These plants were overseen by a military staff, but a private corporation had the contract to operate the plants. The Southwestern Proving Ground in Hope and the Pine Bluff Arsenal were government owned and operated. All the plants depended heavily on civilian workers for their main work force. The wartime industries brought needed money and jobs for Arkansas citizens after the brutal depression years and contributed greatly to the economy of Arkansas. After the war, the state never returned to the heavy agricultural-based economy that had been prominent before the war, seeking instead to build a more industrialized economy.

Arkansas business and political leaders lobbied for the plants and pointed out the advantages of locating plants in Arkansas. Arkansas had unlimited supplies of natural gas and coal and offered strategic locations away from the coastal areas of the United States where they were safer from foreign attack. They would also be away from large population centers but still have a large available labor force.

With the able-bodied men needed for military service, the job of manning the defense plants fell to people that had never been in the labor force before or who

⁴ Carolyn Yancey Kent, "World War II Ordnance Plants." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture* <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=373>

had been employed in low-paying work. Handicapped people, women (many who had never worked outside the home), young people, and older adults lined up for jobs. African Americans in particular, in the midst of the Jim Crow South during the Depression, actively sought employment. Young people often changed their papers or lied about their age, and the need for workers was so great that the employment officials did not check their ages.

The plants developed into almost self-contained communities. Sewer systems and water systems were developed, while roads and rail lines were built within the sites. Spur lines were built to connect to outside rail services. The plants had their own hospitals, fire departments, maintenance departments, and cafeterias, and several of the plants had recreation facilities on site. All the sites were fenced, plant guards patrolled the sites, and security was very tight. Several of the plants produced their own newsletters.

On June 4, 1941, the War Department notified Governor Homer Adkins and Congressman David D. Terry that a \$33,000,000 fuse and detonator plant would be constructed near Jacksonville. The plant was the first national defense industry approved for the state, and at the peak of production on November 22, 1942, 14,092 workers were employed at the plant.

The contract for the plant was awarded to Ford, Bacon & Davis of New York, making this plant a GOCO (Government-Owned, Contractor-Operated) plant and was one of the first of its kind in the nation operating under the “cost-plus” system that fueled production during the war. The facility had several assembly

lines that occupied clusters of buildings where fuses, boosters, detonators, and primers were produced. The first assembly line was opened on March 4, 1942, and additional lines were all operational by June of 1942.

As mentioned earlier, a large majority, as much as seventy to eighty percent of the plant workers were women. Many were young women in their late teens and twenties who were in close proximity to young men who were training at nearby Camp Robinson, and who were also making money for the first time in years.⁵ An emotional atmosphere developed between trainees and workers at these facilities, leading to them being describes as “hotbeds of passion”⁶ for obvious reasons. By December 31, 1944, there were 3,085 African Americans working four lines and comprising twenty-four percent of the work force, and had fifty-five African-American supervisors.⁷

The plant was in continuous production from 1942 until August 1945 and produced over one billion detonators and relays, over 100 million primers, over 300 million percussion elements, over 175 million fuses, and over 5 million boosters (combination of a booster charge of high explosives and its container, usually a metal tube screwed into or otherwise attached to the adaptor, and extending down to the explosive charge of the projectile). As the war began winding down, the number of employees needed decreased, and by August 1945, the number of employees had dropped to 7,000. By the end of August 1945,

⁵ Site Visit and museum exhibit, April 5, 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carolyn Yancey Kent, “World War II Ordnance Plants.”

another 600 of the employees were dropped from the payroll, and the plant was completely closed by March 1946.⁸

In 1946, the plant facilities were put up for sale. Some buildings were leased or sold to industries that located on the site. Other buildings were removed from the site and taken to educational facilities around Arkansas. Some of the land was resold to the former owners, with a condition that if the government needed it, it would be retaken.⁹ Little Rock Air Force Base took in part of the former plant site in the 1950s, and some of the owners had to give up their land for a second time.¹⁰

In 2002, the Little Rock Air Force Base Historical Foundation, Inc. purchased a building located on the site of the former AOP administration building that was converted in 2004 to the Jacksonville Museum of Military History. The museum first opened its doors in May 2005 with the mission to educate the public about the important contributions made by both the civilian workforce and the military in past and current conflicts.¹¹ The initial intent of the museum was to preserve the history of the important home-front contributions made by the AOP workers in the war effort during World War II. As planning progressed, museum supporters soon realized that the scope of the museum should be expanded to include the rich military history of Jacksonville and the surrounding area. This history dates back to the Civil War, most notably the Battle of Reed's Bridge, also

⁸ Carolyn Yancey Kent, "World War II Ordnance Plants."

⁹ Site Visit, museum exhibit, and discussion with Danna Kay Duggar, Museum director, April 5, 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Museum Information." Jacksonville Museum of Military History."

<http://www.jaxmilitarymuseum.org/museuminfo.html>

known as the action at Bayou Meto, which was fought on August 27, 1863, as Confederate troops sought to hinder the advance of Major General Frederick Steele's Union army toward Little Rock. This action is honored by a prominent exhibit located in the west wing of the museum toward the front. The history commemorated here extends generations into the Iraq War, which has engaged units at Little Rock Air Force Base, and also includes the history of the AOP.¹²

With almost 15,000 feet of total display space, the Jacksonville Museum of Military History has an impressive collection of original World War II posters including the "Four Freedoms" posters. The "Four Freedoms" were illustrated by Norman Rockwell for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 to highlight the speech given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the same name to Congress on January 6, 1941. The illustrations include "The Freedom of Speech," "The Freedom of Worship," "The Freedom from Want," and "The Freedom from Fear." The posters were widely distributed during World War II but now are difficult to locate, particularly in the large 3.5' x 4.5' size displayed in the museum's entry. Other notable artifacts include the dress uniform worn by Airman First Class Cindy Elia, the first enlisted woman to act as dining out sergeant of arms in the history of the U.S. Air Force. Unique to the museum, and one of the largest exhibits, is an exhibit with artifacts detailing the 1980 explosion of the nuclear Titan II missile near Damascus along the Van Buren-Faulkner County line. Popular in that time was a t-shirt that was once numerous around Central Arkansas and beyond, asking the question: "Where Were You When Titan II

¹² Site Visit, April 5, 2017.

Blew? Have a Blast in Damascus, Arkansas.” There are exhibits commemorating the wars that touched Arkansas, featuring what you will find to be a very unique Korean War exhibit on the desperate Battle of the Chosin Reservoir from November 27 to December 13, 1950. In order to avoid detection by the then-superior North Korean forces, U.S. Marines used the code, “Send us Tootsie Rolls” to state that they needed ammunition. But by mistake, actual Tootsie Rolls were dropped to that unit trying to hold the Chosin line against the North Koreans. While upset over the delayed ammunition drop (which soon came), the ever resourceful Marines discovered that the Tootsies could be used to plug bullet holes in fuel and water tanks along with other steel implements of war. Various artifacts of advancing military technology are also featured, such as a 1970s vintage Air Force flight simulator from Little Rock Air Force Base.¹³

As the museum continues to grow, new exhibits have included a history of the Little Rock Air Force Base and the Arkansas National Guard, and special exhibits such as a black military history exhibit. Future plans also include a research and reading library.¹⁴

Thank you all for coming today! Please join us for our next Sandwiching in History tour of 2017 on Friday June 2 at the Carmelite Convent and Chapel at 7201 West 32nd Street in Little Rock. We will begin at Noon. Hope to see you at both of these and our future tours this year!

¹³ Site Visit and museum exhibits, April 5, 2017.

¹⁴ Site Visit, April 5, 2017.

And just a reminder, if you are dining out after the tour, be sure to patronize our locally owned establishments. You'll love the taste, and you're building a better Jacksonville!