

**Sandwiching in History Tour
Maumelle Ordnance Works Bunker #4
June 1, 2018**



Hello, my name is David Collins. I am a graduate student in the Public History program at UA Little Rock and a graduate assistant with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

I would like to welcome you to the Sandwiching in History tour of the Maumelle Ordnance Works Bunker #4. I'm so glad you all could be here today. I'd also like to thank the city of Maumelle for allowing us to tour the facilities today.

Hopefully you know that you are currently in the heart of the city of Maumelle. You may not know that the city was only officially incorporated in 1985, so its history may just be beginning to grow, but the area as a whole underwent different kinds of development well before it became Maumelle. Most notably, as evidenced by the bunkers you see here, the surrounding area was used throughout World War II to house facilities that produced ammunition for the

war effort. But before we discuss that, let's get a sense of how the Maumelle area developed before the war.

Prior to large-scale settlement, there is some archaeological evidence that suggests Maumelle was part of the larger Osage territory north of the Arkansas River. In the few years after the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, Cherokee clans from west of the Mississippi River were moving into traditional Osage lands. Much of the Osage were forced to give up claim to their lands and move west into Oklahoma territory after having inhabited the area for centuries.

The earliest Europeans to explore the area—the Spanish and French—traded with Natives for decades. Those French traders were likely even responsible for the name Maumelle, which in Francès meant “breast”—a physical description of Pinnacle Mountain in the distance. During the forced migration of the Indian tribes, the first American settlers began to move in to the Maumelle area. In 1812, brothers Jacob and James Pyeatt led a group of people from Alabama who established a settlement on a site that would eventually become part of the Maumelle Country Club golf course. They intended to set up a lasting community, but they also could have just been really early for their tee time. Still, they were fairly successful in their venture. By 1819, more than 150 people lived in Pyeattstown—the name given to the settlement. James Pyeatt's home was even the site of the first known Protestant church sermon given in Arkansas by a Cumberland Presbyterian minister named John Carnahan.

Besides being home to Territorial Governor James Miller, there was very sparse settlement in the Maumelle/Crystal Hill area throughout the nineteenth century, only scattered small farms. Maumelle continued to serve as farmland for small family holdings throughout the first half of the twentieth century until in July of 1941, the War

Department chose it as the site of one of its new defense plants to be built across the state.

These sites were part of a \$700 million allotment set out by Congress in the fall of 1940 in order to bolster the military's stockpile of munitions. Here in Maumelle, the facilities would officially be a part of what was called the Maumelle Ordnance Works, which covered 680 acres of the surrounding area. The other munitions projects in Arkansas included sites at Jacksonville, Pine Bluff, Camden, El Dorado, Hope, Fort Smith, Bauxite, Jones Mills, and Lake Catherine. They each were intended for specific purposes in the effort. Some facilities such as the Maumelle Ordnance Works and the Ozark Ordnance Plant in El Dorado refined materials that went into explosives and other weaponry. Others such as the Arkansas Ordnance Plant in Jacksonville, the Pine Bluff Arsenal, and (later) the Naval Ordnance Plant at Camden produced actual ammunition and weapons. Plants in Bauxite, El Dorado, and Jones Mills produced other wartime resources like aviation fuel and aluminum. The Southwest Proving Ground in Hope was used to test weapons before shipping. All these facilities together cost around \$241 million to construct and operated throughout the duration of the war.

As much as possible, the buildings at each site were built of wood to reduce costs, and they were only meant to operate for a period of five years. The majority of them were owned and funded by the United States government, but often operated by private companies. However, an arm of the government called the Chemical Warfare Service operated the Pine Bluff Arsenal, because it housed chemical weapons materials. The Quartermaster Corps and Army Corps of Engineers primarily oversaw the progress of the works as they were constructed.

These projects also helped bolster local economies and even changed the face of labor in Arkansas. Every site employed

hundreds or thousands of Arkansans throughout the war, either in construction or as permanent workers. Of around \$40 million that was allotted for constructing the Jacksonville and Maumelle plants, the government would spend around \$16 million on labor at those locations alone. Many of the building materials were purchased from local suppliers and the majority of the plant workers came from the Little Rock area. Since it primarily used assembly lines in its production, the Jacksonville plant employed up to 14,000 people during peak production, about 75 percent of whom were women. By 1944, 3,085 African American workers contributed to the plant's labor force, including fifty-five supervisors. The Pine Bluff Arsenal saw similar trends, employing up to 9,000 workers. Many of them were women and African American.

In a way, the family farmers that had spent the previous century on the land in and around Maumelle were ushered out along with the small agriculture-based economy of Arkansas once these munitions works began. Ultimately, these large undertakings helped industrialize many Arkansas societies. In order to create this plant, the government purchased around 7,000 acres west of the Marche area through eminent domain and began surveying the land as the old inhabitants moved out. As an *Arkansas Democrat* article stated in September of 1941 as initial construction began, "Few families lived on the construction site, and all of them have moved... One large timber operator is clearing his marketable trees out of the area, and with three sawmills in operation, should quit the area within a short time."

The federal War Department was granted approval to enter into contract with the Cities Service Defense Corporation on July 15, 1941 in order to construct the Maumelle Ordnance Works. The Lummus Company of Little Rock was subcontracted to build the facilities. The next month and a half were spent surveying the land, clearing trees, and laying all necessary water and gas lines. Two

large warehouses were also constructed to house building materials as they were delivered. The primary construction work began in early September and was due to be complete within 10 months. However, not just the facilities needed to be built, but also roads and rail lines in order to transport the raw and finished materials. Six to eight miles of railroad track were laid and an extensive road system was built, which connected to Highway 65. During the early stages of construction, around a dozen horses were kept on site to be used by the construction quartermaster, foreman, and other officials due to extremely wet conditions. Major Harry S. Bronson, the construction quartermaster, is often seen in *Arkansas Democrat* articles from the time atop his horse as he oversaw the project.

Construction continued on pace through the end of 1941, at which point the plant was only about 20 percent complete according to Major Bronson. The plant was being constructed to produce ammonium picrate using picric acid. Picric acid was primarily used as a bursting agent in missiles and other ammunition since the First World War. Ultimately, the entire compound was to consist of nine ammonium picrate production units, cooling towers, an ammonium oxidation plant, acid concentration facilities, an administration building, a cafeteria, a hospital, a fire station, a carpenter and smith building, an auto shop, storage for vehicles, a warehouse, and 21 bunkers.

By February of 1942, the plant began ordering materials to produce the ammonium picrate. In March of 1942, as construction on the many facilities continued, it was decided that the plant should increase its production capacity by fifty percent, adding three more picrate plants. This led to a longer timetable for completing the project and a halted schedule due to delays in the arrival of materials needed to construct the extra units. Finally, all nine units were completed by the end of May 1942. The War Department requested that production of the picric acid and ammonium picrate

should begin by July 16, 1942. All the facilities on the rest of the compound were not complete until August 1942, but by that time the explosive materials were already being produced.

By the time production was ceased in August of 1945, Maumelle Ordnance Works had produced 113,692,135 pounds of ammonium picrate. Decontamination also began during that month and was complete by the end of the year. The compound and a small contingent of plant workers were kept on standby for months after the facilities were cleared. They were used for various purposes during this period of inactivity, such as storing explosives that were being moved across the state. By early 1947, parts of the larger “safety zone” areas surrounding the 680-acre compound were returned to former owners or sold. The government continued to control the thousands of acres of land until it was declared unnecessary for further use in 1959.

The General Services Administration listed the property for bidding and found an acceptable offer in 1961 made by Perry Equipment Company. The Perry Company salvaged the remaining equipment and materials from the site facilities. When they finished, there were still thousands of acres not being used, so the company sold the land to the city of North Little Rock, but it continued to remain unused by the city throughout the remainder of the decade.

In the late 1960s, a prominent businessman in the area, Jess Odom, created the Maumelle Land Development Company. Armed with a development plan for a modern community and \$45 million dollars in assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, he began building what was being called “Maumelle New Town”. By 1974, the first residents began to move in, but property sales did not keep up with investment costs. The New Town project was somewhat abandoned as the Maumelle Land Development Company sold much of its land holdings to private

developers. On June 20, 1985, after North Little Rock attempted to annex the area, Maumelle was incorporated as a first class city. Lake Willastein itself was developed a year before the incorporation of the city and covers about 100 acres of the original 680-acre plant site.

So what happened to all the facilities that were a part of Maumelle Ordnance Works? After the government decommissioned the site and the Perry Company salvaged as much as possible, throughout the 1960s and 1970s efforts to raze the remaining buildings took place. The bunkers proved to be the most difficult to get rid of, as the city left three remaining here around Lake Willastein. They are each less than a mile apart and have different uses. To the east, there is Bunker #3, which was owned by the city and used for various purposes. To the west is what was once an enclosed bunker, which was converted into a pavilion for the park. And here we have Bunker #4, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on May 24, 2006 in order to preserve what remains of the Maumelle Ordnance Works. As has already been noted, these bunkers were primarily used for industrial purposes rather than for defensive purposes. Explosive materials were stored in them throughout the course of the Maumelle Ordnance Works operations from 1942 to 1945. Still, they were built as defensive bunkers with steel-reinforced concrete and buried in the earth for additional concussive protection.

Ultimately, these bunkers connect Maumelle to a time when it was being developed before officially being developed. It was a time when the war effort on the home front brought more industry into the state and transformed local labor patterns. This was the period when Maumelle transitioned from a small farming area into a land with industrial potential, eventually becoming a thriving city with many thousands of residents.

This concludes the Sandwiching in History Tour of the Maumelle Ordnance Works Bunker #4. Again, I'd like to thank you all for coming and feel free to enjoy the park today as you visit the other bunker sites. Our next Sandwiching tour will be on Friday, July 6 at 12:00 p.m. at the William Woodruff House, which is located at 1017 E. 8th Street in Little Rock. Thank you.