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Rock Island Arsenal: Heart of the Quad Cities

By the 1850's, many local residents began advocating for the development of a federal arsenal at Rock Island. Residents recognized the tremendous economic potential a national arsenal could bring to the local economy, but also believed Rock Island possessed a valuable strategic location in the middle of the country along major transportation routes. In 1859, the Iowa State Legislature joined the cause by sending a memorial advocating such a plan to the U.S. Congress. A joint resolution approved by the Iowa Legislature in 1861 called for the Iowa Congressional delegation to work for the establishment of an arsenal on Rock Island. During the same year, Governor Yates of Illinois sent a letter to the Secretary of War encouraging him to support the location of an armory at Rock Island. Yate's letter proved timely. Harper's Ferry had been destroyed by Confederate troops in April 1861, demonstrating to Congress the need for a replacement site secure from enemy attack.

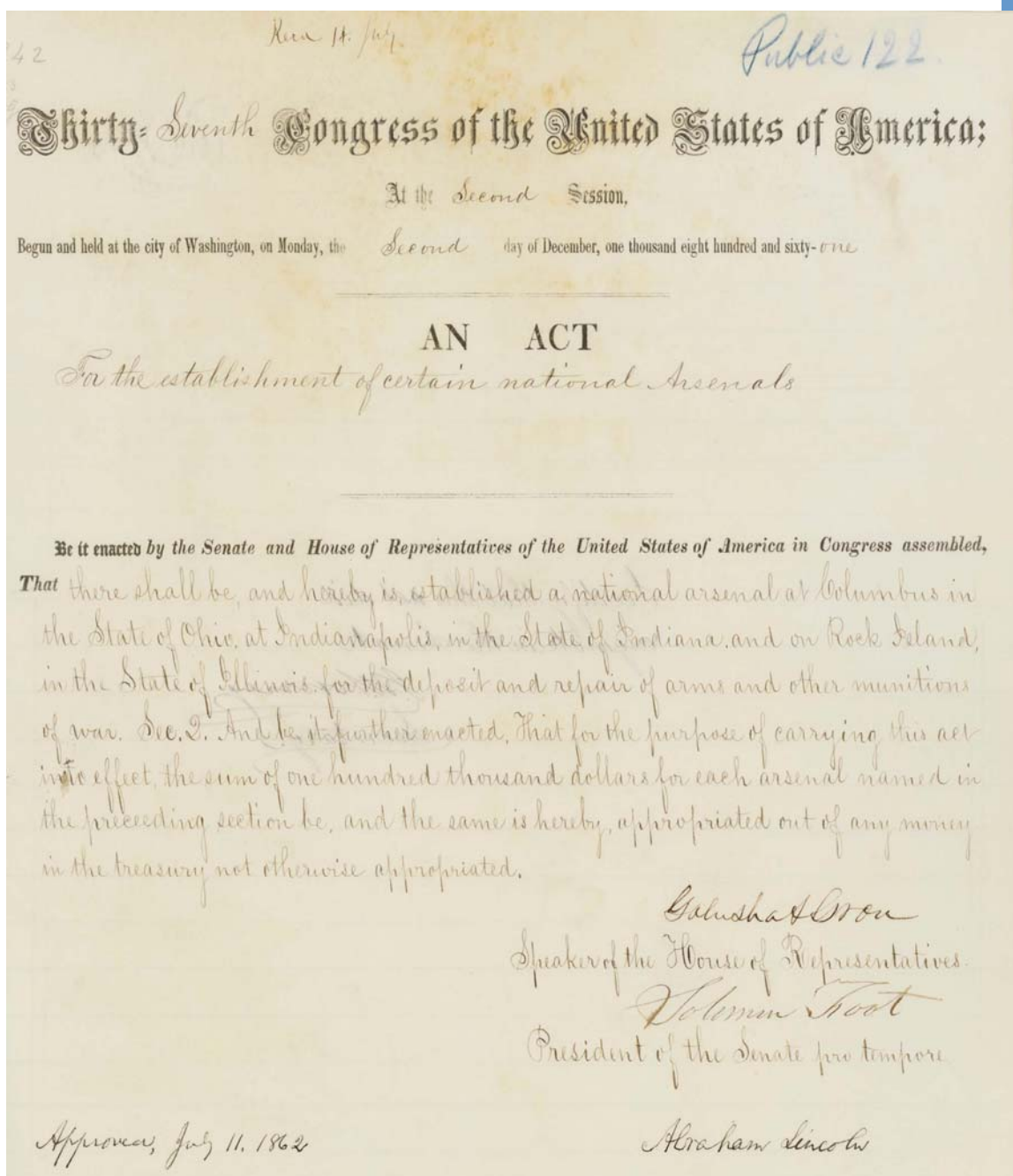
The same year, Bailey Davenport, son of Colonel George Davenport and Mayor of Rock Island, continued to marshal local support as part of a well organized campaign to attract congressional support for an arsenal at Rock Island. Local newspapers wrote articles promoting the island as a site for a national arsenal, and Mayor Davenport persuaded the Rock Island City Council to appropriate funds for the printing of a promo-

tional pamphlet. The pamphlet stressed the potential waterpower and rich resources found in the upper Mississippi River Valley and nearby regions. It also emphasized Rock Island's excellent access to river and rail transportation, as well as noted the Island's strategic location, which made the Island relatively impervious from invasion. (With the water level being much lower, Rock Island was surrounded by 15-20 foot bluffs.) The pamphlet went on to cite the plentiful supply of inexpensive labor and food found in the Rock Island vicinity as additional reasons for the area's suitability as a national arsenal. The pamphlets were freely and widely distributed to congressional officials.

A committee of ten men, led by Bailey Davenport, served as the executive committee for the local campaign. The committee members came from the tri-cities, with half the representatives from Rock Island, and the remaining five from Davenport, Iowa, and

Moline, Illinois. Major H.C. Connelley, a prominent Rock Island attorney, conducted a tour through the Midwest to explain how an arsenal could benefit other local communities. Committee members also traveled to Washington, D.C. to lobby for the adoption of Senate Bill No. 352, which called for the creation of an arsenal on Rock Island.

On July 11, 1862, Congress passed an Act, shown below, establishing a national arsenal at Rock Island "for the deposit and repair of arms and other munitions of war." At the bottom of the document you can see President Abraham Lincoln's signature. The legislation set off a series of events that allowed the military to return to the Island and marked the beginning of a long and enduring relationship between the local community and the Arsenal. Happy Sesquicentennial!



Rock Island Arsenal history...

- > **1816, May:** Construction of Fort Armstrong begins
- > **1845, July:** George Davenport murdered at his home by river bandits
- > **1856, April:** 1st railroad bridge across the Mississippi is built from Rock Island to Davenport
- > **1862, July:** The U.S. Congress passes an act that establishes the arsenal on Rock Island
- > **1863, Dec.:** RIA Prison Barracks receives first shipment of Confederate prisoners of war
- > **1871, Oct.:** Quarters One completed
- > **1893:** Construction of Ten Stone Shops completed
- > **1896, Dec.:** Current Government Bridge completed
- > **1898:** By this time the Arsenal can produce anything a soldier needs, except a rifle
- > **1943, Jul:** RIA employment reaches peak with 18,675 workers
- > **1962, Aug:** WECOM becomes first AMC two-star command on island
- > **1987, Jul:** Completion of Project REARM