



# ASC HISTORY NEWSLETTER

## KINGSBURY AT HARPERS FERRY

Harpers Ferry Armory is often best known as the site of John Brown's Raid. In 1859 Brown occupied the Armory in an attempt to liberate weapons to arm a slave uprising; Brown's plan met with failure. Just 17 months later the armory stores were destroyed by Union forces, and that act paved the way for the Rock Island Arsenal to be constructed.

In 1794 Harpers Ferry was selected by George Washington for the site of the second national armory. In 1796, the government purchased land bounded by the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers from the heirs of Robert Harper. Construction of the "United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry" began in 1799. Three years later full-scale production of arms commenced. Muskets, rifles and, after 1805, pistols were all manufactured here. The armory served its purpose well over the years providing weapons for Lewis and Clark and the War of 1812, implementing interchangeable parts, and producing the modern rifled musket. In early 1861 the superintendent deserted to the Virginia secession convention. On 17 April, 1861 Captain Charles P. Kingsbury was assigned as the acting superintendent with support of some 20 soldiers. His assignment lasted less than 48 hours.

On the morning of 18 April, the

day after Virginia voted to secede, word was received that three trains of confederate troops were on their way from Richmond for the supposed confiscation of weapons and destruction of Harpers Ferry. Over 14,000 weapons were on the grounds of the armory. In order to deny the weapons and facilities, Kingsbury and other officials on site began to prepare. Captain Kingsbury ordered small barrels of gun powder be wrapped in the soldiers bedding and covertly taken to where the weapons were stored. Flammable material was placed on top of the powder, and then the men waited. Between 9 and 10pm that night, word was received that 2,000 men were marching on the armory, and Captain Kingsbury gave the order: the match was lit, and the Armory went up in smoke. The explosions and flames did their job where the weapons were stored; at most a thousand fell into the hands of the rebels. Unfortunately, the gunpowder did not explode in the production buildings and much equipment was saved. Two weeks later the Confederates moved the machinery to Richmond and destroyed the rest of the armory.

Congress immediately understood the need for a series of new arsenals out of the reach of the Confederate forces, including one to supply the Army on the frontier. In 1862 they authorized the establishment of the Rock Island Arsenal. Upon creation of the RIA, a team of officers went to Rock Island to survey the land and recommend the layout of the new facility. One of the officers was Kingsbury, now promoted to Major. In early 1863 Major Kingsbury was appointed as the first Commander of RIA and he commenced construction of the Clocktower building. In 1865 Kingsbury began writing the Chief of Ordnance recommending Rock Island Arsenal be developed to serve as a national armory and foundry to replace the production lost at Harpers Ferry. This was approved. While Kingsbury was reassigned prior to completion of even the first permanent building, his presence created a link between the loss of Harpers Ferry and the start of an even grander production facility at RIA.



## STEAM VS. RAIL

In the late 1840s and early 1850s plans began to form to fulfill the desire to build a Chicago to San Francisco rail route. This rail route would cross the Mississippi River at Rock Island, an island under control of the War Department. Southern politicians and railroad men wanted a Southern rail route, but they were not the only ones opposed to the plan for rail through Rock Island.

Steamboat and river town interests saw the building of any railroad as a threat to their inland waterway economy. The Mississippi River and its tributaries provided a natural north-south trade route for the Midwest's agricultural products and raw materials. The arrival of the railroad, on the other hand, offered Midwest farmers of Iowa and northern Illinois a direct east-west trade route to Chicago and urban markets farther east. The clash between these two powerful eco-

nomic interests for control of the Midwest's commercial shipping occurred at Rock Island.

There were quite a few roadblocks and hiccups involved in building the rail bridge. The first one came in June 1854 when an officer from Washington, accompanied by two U.S. marshals, appeared at Rock Island. The officer notified the bridge contractors that they were trespassing on federal property and instructed them to halt operations and remove all property from the island within 15 days. The warning was ignored, however, and construction on the rail bridge continued.

An Act of Congress in 1852 had previously granted right-of-way through public lands to railroads and road building companies. Assuming Rock Island was public land because there was no military presence, the M&M Bridge Company assumed the Act of 1852 would protect them. Eventu-

ally, after much correspondence, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis ordered the U.S. District Attorney in northern Illinois to begin litigation against the M&M Bridge Company. The two main charges were trespassing on federal property and obstructing river navigation.

Much to the dismay of steamboats, Judge John McLean, an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the M&M Bridge Company, citing the Act of 1852. Another court case arose after the steamboat *Effie Afton* crashed into the bridge just two weeks after construction was completed. The ruling, again, gave permission for the bridge to span the Mississippi River. From this court case, however, river traffic was given the right-of-way. This ruling still stands today, explaining why traffic stops on the government bridge when a barge is passing through.

***This MONTH in military history...***

***1776: Congress opens all US ports to international trade***

***1777: US Navy captures 1st British warship***

***1862: Battle of Shiloh***

***1864: Confederates rout Union at Battle of Mansfield***

***1945: Japanese battleship Yamato is sunk by Allied forces***

***1965: US ground combat troops begin offensive measures***

***1990: US and Soviet negotiators make progress***

Judge John McLean

