

ASC History Newsletter

Watertown and Rock Island



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While covering the Boston bombing one live commentator noted that the crew was in Watertown on Arsenal Street. She then wondered if there had been a Federal property nearby in the past. Of course! But that comment also inspired some additional research that revealed a surprising number of similarities and connections between Watertown Arsenal (WA) and Rock Island Arsenal.

Watertown Arsenal was established in 1816 on the Charles River. Like Rock Island, the site was selected to take advantage of the water and ground transportation net. WA's original mission was to store, maintain, and issue munitions. By 1830 the mission was expanded to manufacture field, siege, and seacoast guns and carriages. This is similar to the RIA starting as a storage and maintenance facility for the West and later expanding into a manufacturing facility for the nation after the Civil War. Over the years WA became renowned for the manufacture of cannon and for its metallurgy labs. This process was begun by the pioneering work of Major Thomas Rodman during his

tour of command from 1859 – 65. The Rodman Laboratory was later founded to further develop testing of metals. When WA needed to expand after the Civil War they purchased property from the Sears' family, as RIA had compensated David Sears in 1862. WA eventually became a test center for the use of titanium. In 1960 a research reactor was built on the grounds and ran until 1970. RIA also had a Rodman Laboratory and is currently working to further develop the casting of titanium.

A look at the map of the WA reveals other similarities. Roads are named Kingsbury, Rodman, Flagler, and Hobbs. These four officers commanded both Watertown and RIA. Kingsbury, the first commander at RIA departed in 1865 to take command of Watertown. At the same time Rodman left Watertown to take command of Rock Island. Col Flagler, the officer who commanded RIA from 1871-86, took command of WA in 1889. Hobbs commanded WA 1905-07 and then RIA 1907-11. Perhaps the greatest visual connection is Rodman's architectural vision. His RIA shop buildings were a grander design than those he constructed at Watertown during the Civil War. The picture shows WA shop 313,

designed and constructed by Rodman. Compare the design, power system, and chimneys to the buildings at RIA. Finally, the massive commander's quarters at both arsenals are the work of Rodman. A Congressional investigation into the house at WA was one of the reasons he was shipped West. He later built a house twice as large.

WA was closed in 1967. The Army Materials and Mechanics Research Center remained active at WA until 1995 when the remainder of the property was disposed. In the last years the labs developed Kevlar, and ceramic armor. Those last two items were used by a large number of police involved in the shootout with the Boston Marathon bombers, just 200 yards north of the old Watertown Arsenal main gate.

This MONTH in military history...

1776: Washington recommends using German-American troops to Congress

1804: Lewis and Clark depart



1864: Lee beats Grant to Spotsylvania

1864: Union troops take Snake Creek Gap, Georgia

1945: Herman Goering is captured by the US Seventh Army

1970: Nixon defends invasion of Cambodia

1975: American ship Mayaguez seized

1872 Iron Bridge

In 1866, the federal government proposed to the M&M Bridge Company that the location of the bridge on Rock Island be changed to its current site, and the government offered to share the expense of building the new bridge. Brigadier General Thomas Rodman drafted the plan which satisfied the requirements of both the railroad company and the United States Government. The railroad company agreed to give up its old right-of-way across Rock Island and remove its tracks and bridges in exchange for a new bridge, which would be built at the extreme west end of the island. In 1869, General Rodman had ordered surveys of the Mississippi riverbed and measurements of the river-current velocity. He then determined the sites for the bridge abutments and piers. Most importantly, the railroad tracks across the island were relocated to allow the Arsenal to fully develop the interior of arsenal trackage. To expand the Arsenal further, Rodman wanted the original bridge moved down

and out of the way.

Initially the bridge was to be a double track bridge with an extra deck for wagons. However, estimated costs for such a bridge exceeded congressional appropriations. General Rodman carried on a lengthy correspondence with the Chief of Ordnance and the Secretary of War seeking the additional funds necessary to build the bridge. Unfortunately his persistence led to the transfer of the bridge construction to the Engineering Department. Major Daniel Flagler, his successor as stated: "General Rodman was deeply interested, and took great pride in his work, and its (bridge construction) transfer to other offices was a serious blow to him."

General Rodman remained interested in the bridge after its transfer to the engineers. Periodically, he recommended changes

in its construction. His suggestions included such basic revisions as the placing of the wagon road deck under the railroad tracks, rather than above it, as initially planned.

The 1872 iron bridge measured slightly over 1,500 feet in length. The bridge had five spans 220 to 260 feet long, plus a draw span of 368 feet in length. The superstructure of the bridge was a double Whipple truss with two decks. Considering it was constructed for two way traffic, the width of the bridge was a narrow sixteen feet. The bridge was finally completed and turned over to the Rock Island Arsenal in 1873. By the 1890s, however, locomotives and rail cars had become too large and heavy for the old 1872 iron bridge and a replacement was needed.

