

Springfield Armory

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Legacy of Superintendents and Commandants of Springfield Armory

The Superintendents and Commandants often exercised a degree of influence that brought changes in the Armory, the City of Springfield, the Nation and the Industrial World. Their legacy remains after most of the faces have been forgotten. In the course of their respective tenures, these men did more than just administrate the National Armory. Among them were inventors, social reformers, and dedicated citizens who wanted to leave more than a balanced account book at the Armory. Many of their lasting gifts remain as visible features in city of Springfield and modern arms manufacturing.

The leaders of Springfield Armory left many lasting marks on the Springfield community. The spirit and vision of these individuals are seen in monuments, places of worship, public parks and stately homes. In these ways Springfield Armory brought cohesion to the ever-growing City of Springfield.

This was recognized when Springfield became a city in 1852 and incorporated the recently completed Main Arsenal on its seal. The structure is the museum building you are visiting today.

Civilians and Military Officers



Lt. Col. Roswell Lee
Superintendent 1815-1833

The Superintendent (civilian administrator), or Commandant (military officer) of Springfield Armory maintained an efficient, and cost effective arms production facility for the U.S. Government. The occupants of this position were a mixture of dedicated citizens and mediocre bureaucrats.

The position of Superintendent of the Armory was established without definite parameters of authority. The original legislation that created the position also named two additional appointments that were to create a system of checks and balances.

The Master Armorer and Superintendent were to see to the operation of the Armory. The third party, the Military Storekeeper/Paymaster, was

to attend to safe keeping and distribution of the military stores at the Arsrnals. Though the last position was the highest paid official, his preeminence diminished as the Armory grew in importance.

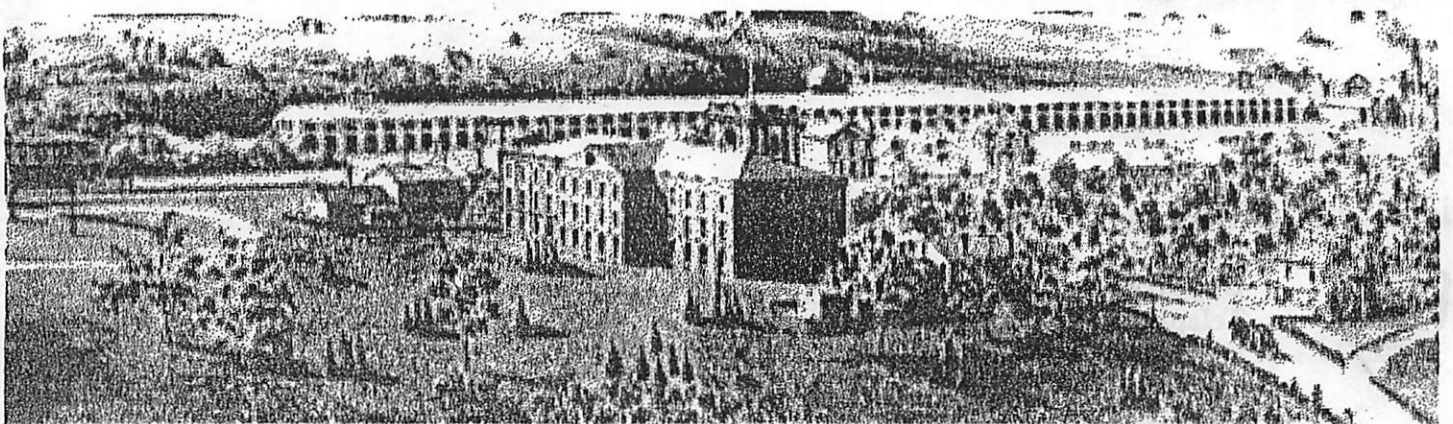
In the end, the Superintendent became the chief responsible party managing the National Armory. Overseeing this operation was described by one as :

"... far more arduous and difficult than the command of a regiment, even in time of war, but as I have begun in the past I am determined to preserve and do the best I can for the Establishment ..."

Growing Nation, City and Armory.

Operations at the Armory began slowly, with 40 workers producing 245 flintlock muskets in its first year (1795). Steadily the new federal installation became more confident and successful. Strong Commanding Officers, notably Roswell Lee and James W. Ripley, were inspired by a vision of Springfield as the "Grand National Armory." They saw it as not only an outstanding manufacturing facility, but a symbol of the growing power and dignity of the national government.

As this vision became reality, Springfield took increasing pride in its Armory. The Armory started Springfield on the path that made it a manufacturing center and the most important city of western Massachusetts. These men felt a responsibility to fulfill their appointed duties and to help the community and the Nation.



Roswell Lee and Social Reforms

The early 19th century community of Springfield was intolerant of the new arrivals who formed the work force of Springfield Armory. The common Armory laborer was prohibited from attending services in the community churches. Roswell Lee, Superintendent of Springfield Armory, took action to guarantee the workers' right to freedom of worship. In February, 1817 Lee wrote to Rev. Titus Strong requesting him to dedicate a room at the Armory to serve as a chapel. This contact with Reverend Strong would begin the establishment of the Episcopal Congregation that expanded into the present day Christ Church.

In 1838, this Church received its first permanent rector, Henry Lee, son of Colonel Roswell Lee.

The relationship with Rev. Strong also led to the establishment of the first local chapter of the Free Masons in Springfield. The membership included: Dr. Samuel Osgood, Major James W. Ripley, Thomas Warner and Erskine Allin. The original Roswell Lee Masonic Lodge on State Street is now the site of a temple built during the 1920's.

Ripley: In Service to Springfield and the Nation

The influence of the Commandants took a variety of forms. Major James W. Ripley experienced several controversial years as the Commanding Officer of the Armory. His methods of operation met with criticism from the community. Mostly these critics sighted his expenses on new structures at the Hill Shops.

Yet it was this construction that gave the Armory the appearance that remains to this day. The Commandants house, the Main Arsenal and the cast Iron fence were all products of his plans to expand the Armory. The Main Arsenal building, with a capacity to hold 300,000 arms, was the largest storage area at the Armory.

The fence constructed around the perimeter of Armory Square served to safeguard the manufacturing complex. The fence construction utilized the idea of recycling by using condemned cannons and gun barrels as the materials for casting the barrier.

Major Ripley continued to influence the Armory even after he left as Commandant. As Chief of Ordnance during the Civil War, Maj. Ripley focused arms production on percussion muzzle loaders. The adoption of any form of breech-loading arm would have drained the government of large sums of money, man power and most importantly, delayed the delivery of usable arms to the Federal forces.

The Legacy of Benton's Museum

Col. James G. Benton, Armory Commanding Officer from 1866 to 1881, is credited with establishing the museum as a public attraction in 1872. The museum has been in continuous operation since.

The first expansion of the collection was the addition of the Centennial Exhibit, displayed in Philadelphia in 1876. Col. Benton originated the idea for making the museum a "reference library" of weapons by adding arms from the Indian Wars. The firearms

collection is one off the most comprehensive in the world, and offers the most complete collection of Confederate weapons. The collection is still actively growing. The legacy of the Armory survives mainly in memory and in the historical record, but it is a record that gleams as the polished lockplate of a Springfield musket. The Armory was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962 and managed by the National Park Service as of 1978.

Bibliography

To learn more about the Superintendents and Commandants of Springfield Armory we recommend the following books:

King's Handbook of Springfield by Moses King. James Gill Publisher, 1884

Arms Making in the Connecticut Valley. by Felicia Johnson Deyrup. George Shumway, Publisher, 1970.

Old Springfield, Its Inhabitants and Mansions by Charles Wells Chapin. Springfield Printing, 1893

Western Massachusetts A History 1636-1925 Volumes I-IV by Rev. John H. Lockwood. Lewis Historical Publications, 1926

Misfire-The History of How America's Small Arms Failed Our Military By William H. Hallahan, Charles H. Scribner & Sons, 1994

Additional information can be obtained by contacting:

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