



# The ASC History Newsletter

## Fort Armstrong 1816-1836: A Short History

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

- 1539: Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto landed at Tampa Bay, Florida
- 1778: Battle of Crooked Billet
- 1780: Battle of Waxhaws
- 1804: Lewis and Clark Expedition began
- 1813: Americans captured Fort George, Canada
- 1830: U.S. President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act
- 1863: Battle of Chancellorsville
- 1898: U.S. Navy destroys the Spanish Pacific fleet in Manila Bay
- 1918: Third German offensive on Western Front
- 1942: Battle of Midway
- 1944: USS England sank a record six Japanese submarines in 13 days
- 1944: D-Day on the beaches of Normandy
- 1951: Operation Piledriver
- 1969: Battle of Hamburger Hill
- 1995: NATO warplanes struck Bosnian Serb headquarters

In the spring of 1816, Brevet Brigadier General Thomas led an expedition up the Mississippi River to build forts in strategic locations. The expedition consisted of 800 regular army soldiers and 150 laborers. This total amounted to 10% of the nation's standing army. On 10 May 1816, the group landed on Rock Island and began building the fort, which would be named after former Secretary of War John Armstrong. Between 1816 and 1819, the US government spent 2.3 million dollars for fortifications. Surprisingly, Fort Armstrong cost only \$77.70, a bargain considering its importance to the development of the area.

The site of the fort was chosen for four reasons: 1) It would deter British and other foreign trading outfits from operating in the river valley; 2) Observation of Sauk and Fox Indians, who had aligned themselves with the British during the War of 1812; 3) Protection for American fur traders; 4) and the preservation of lines of communication to Prairie du Chien and other posts up river.

In 1819, Major M. Marston, commander of the fort, provided this description: "The fort is about 270-feet square with three block houses, mounting three 6 pounders, the barracks are well constructed of hewn timber, stone and well built... the fort is built on the lower point of Rock Island upon a perpendicular bank 25 feet in height. It completely commands both channels of the river."

After construction of the fort was complete, the garrison was reduced from 600 to 50. In 1823 a second company was added to the garrison raising the total number to +/-100 soldiers. For the soldiers at the fort, life was not easy. Major Marston wrote, "Life at Fort Armstrong was monotonous and unpleasant, it was a sacrifice in the best of times to be stationed two or three hundred miles from civilization."

At that time, army logistics left much to be desired. Mail service was poor in the area, which added to the soldier's isolation.

Likewise, soldier's had to grow their own food to sustain the garrison throughout the year. The fort's gardens produced beets, carrots, onions, potatoes, beans and corn. When the soldiers were not providing for their own sustenance, they were employed as carpenters to build stables and repair barracks, as teamsters, herdsmen, blacksmiths, stewards in the hospital or on detachment at local lead mines.

Like other forts on the frontier, Fort Armstrong projected American power and control over critical areas. In the age of westward migration, these frontier forts provided security for settlers either passing through or those choosing to live in the area. The influx of settlers strained relations with local tribes. This placed the garrison in a difficult position. The garrison had to uphold the rights of the Sauk and Fox, many times to the detriment to settlers/ squatters on Indian land. Despite the fort being built to specifically keep an eye on the Sauk and Fox tribe, relations were relatively peaceful between them and the US Army from 1817-1828.

In 1828, relations started to turn for the worse. With demands for more land by settlers, George Davenport and Thomas Forsyth (Indian Agent) asked the Sauk to relocate to the west bank of the Mississippi, instead of returning to the east bank in the spring. A majority of the Sauk relocated to the west bank of the river, however Blackhawk and his band tried on a couple of occasions between 1828 and 1831 to cross the river to their village Saukenuk around present-day Blackhawk state park. Mounted Illinois militia were called out to enforce existing treaties and ensure Blackhawk and his band returned to the opposite bank.

In 1832, Blackhawk moved his band peacefully across the river to reside in Prophetstown after an invitation was extended to him and his followers. The peaceful move degenerated into open warfare after a minor clash between Blackhawk, his band and



inebriated Illinois militiamen. It is important to note that because of this incident, the US Army eliminated the daily whiskey ration for soldiers. Throughout the conflict, Fort Armstrong would provide logistical support to the myriad of units in the field, not so dissimilar to the present-day. By early August, Regular army units and militia brought the war to an end at the Battle of Bad Axe.

With the end of the Blackhawk war, there was no longer a need for Fort Armstrong to check Indian aggression or monitor the meddling of foreign powers along the river. In 1836, the garrison, except for a small caretaker force of 12 soldiers, evacuated the fort and moved to Fort Snelling, near present-day Minneapolis. From 1840-1856, the fort would continue to be utilized as a depot until it was destroyed by fire.

Fort Armstrong had played a vital role in the founding and development of the Quad cities. The garrison maintained order, as best as it could, between settlers and Indian tribes. Likewise, it projected American power as the nation continued its westward migration.



Source:  
"History of Fort Armstrong: 1816-1836" by Oda Johnston