ROCK ISLAND NATIONAL CEMETERY

Bird's-eye view of Rock Island, 1864. Library of Congress.

Civil War Rock Island

The U.S. Army built Fort Armstrong on Rock Island in 1816. It abandoned the fort in 1836, but then reoccupied it for five years, 1840-45. The onset of the Civil War created a need for military facilities with access to transportation corridors. In 1862, the army returned to the Illinois island permanently.

It built an arsenal here to store ordnance and arms, and repair damaged weapons. Situating the arsenal on an island in the Mississippi River enabled the government to easily ship weapons to troops throughout the region.

In 1863, Rock Island became a prison camp for captured Confederate soldiers. More than 12,000 Confederates passed through Rock Island Prison Barracks between December 1863 and July 1865. Nearly 2,000 prisoners died here.

National Cemetery

The U.S. Army established Rock Island National Cemetery in 1863 near the arsenal. It contained the graves of 136 prison guards. Forty-nine of the dead were members of the 108th U.S. Colored Infantry. When new construction on Rock Island threatened the cemetery in 1868, the Union remains were moved to the present location. Soon after, the remains of 171 soldiers who died in hospitals in nearby Davenport, Iowa, were reinterred here. The roughly-square cemetery encompassed about 1.2 acres.

By 1875, the cemetery was enclosed with an ornate metal fence and accessed through an arched gate. A gravel path led to a rostrum (removed in the 1950s). Arsenal personnel maintained the cemetery until 1973, when it became one of the national cemeteries transferred to the Veterans Administration (now U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs). The oldest part of the cemetery—Sections NW, SE, and SW—is in the southeast corner of the property. Sections of original fence are at the entrance to the Memorial Walkway.

Graves marked with wooden headboards, c. 1875. Rock Island Arsenal Museum.

Rodman grave and monument, 1919. Rock Island Arsenal Museum.

Rodman Monument

Thomas Jackson Rodman served in the army's ordnance department during the Civil War. There he developed a method for casting large-caliber artillery. These new guns were stronger and less likely to explode than earlier models. In August 1865, General Rodman was appointed commandant of Rock Island Arsenal, a position he held until his death in 1871.

Known as the "Father of Rock Island Arsenal," Rodman is credited with the old arsenal plan. Ten massive stone buildings made up the core of the arsenal layout. A large obelisk marks Rodman's grave and that of his wife, Martha Ann, who died in 1908.