

Of arsenals built for nation's earliest defense, Alabama's Mount Vernon is rare example



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This is the first part of a four-part history of the Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site near Mobile. Click [here](#) for an introduction and timeline, along with a gallery of photos of the abandoned site.

Mount Vernon Arsenal part of nation's first defense program

In 1811, during the Creek Wars, the U.S. military established an encampment 3 miles inland of Fort Stoddard known as Mount Vernon Cantonment. This was the first official government use of a site that, more than 200 years later, is one of the most significant in Alabama, and perhaps the nation, according to [Michael W. Panhorst, coordinator of Alabama's Places in Peril](#).

Gen. Andrew Jackson, who had used the cantonment as a rendezvous point for the federal army during the Creek Wars, occupied the site during the War of 1812, according to a 1990s summary of the site's significance by Devereaux Bemis of the Mobile Historical Development Commission.

In 1828, the government approved building 14 arsenals as part of the earliest organized effort to create a permanent defense program nationwide. Of the initial 14, only one other 1828 arsenal survives as a complex, the one at Kennebec, Maine. Of 34 extant structures at the abandoned Mount Vernon complex, at least 13 date to the 1830s.



READ MORE: Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital then-and-now photos

"This extensive historic site deserves protection, preservation and revitalization for the State of Alabama to capitalize on the immense value of this extraordinary place," Panhorst said in August in his summary for the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation.

The arsenals, used to manufacture and store arms and ammunition, were built using a horseshoe-shaped plan common in the military at the time but the Mount Vernon site plan was altered to accommodate a ravine through one side of the property. Inside the horseshoe was the area known as the parade grounds where military exercises and inspections were held.

A HISTORY OF THE MT. VERNON & SEARCY SITE

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In 1830, the first construction began. The central building was a three-story brick structure with a five-story turret. more than a dozen other brick buildings were constructed along the edges of the horseshoe, including an armourer's shop, blacksmith, barracks, subaltern's quarters and more.

The perimeter of the site was protected by a 12-foot high, 1-mile long brick wall that was completed ca. 1836. Because of the ravine, a retaining wall was also required. The perimeter and retaining walls survive today.

In addition, an unusual wooden picket fence surrounded parts of the arsenal. It was a type used at that time for military posts made from thick, rounded vertical posts held by long horizontal posts. The few surviving panels are the only ones of their type known to exist today, Panhorst said.

The Civil War and U.S. infantry

On the eve of the Civil War, one week before Alabama seceded from the Union on Jan. 11, 1861, state militia units acting on orders from Gov. Barry Moore seized Mount Vernon Arsenal from its commander, Capt. Jesse L. Reno, who had only 17 men onsite at the time and was surprised by the attack.

In March, the arsenal was turned over to the Confederacy, which used it through the end of the war, when it was returned to control of the U.S. government. The military used the site as barracks for the Second Regiment of U.S. Infantry from 1865-1894, when several more structures were added, including a kitchen and mess hall that is no longer standing, as well as white frame cottages for married soldiers and officers that still stand. A guardhouse and dispensary were incorporated into a larger building that became the administration building when the site became a hospital in 1902.

During the time the infantry was based at the site, it was used as a prisoner of war camp. It became home to about 400 Chiricahua Apache natives who had been designated as prisoners of war but never charged with crimes. They would be held at the site from 1887-1894. The Apache era history of the Mount Vernon site will be posted on AL.com Wednesday, Sept. 7.

Military significance

Panhorst said he has spoken with Brent Leggs of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who believes the arsenal site "may be a candidate to become one of the 50-60 National Treasures of the [National Trust](#). That would qualify it for advice and assistance from National Trust staff and would certify Mount Vernon's significance on a national level."

Currently, Alabama's only National Treasure site is the 1954 [A.G. Gaston Motel](#) in Birmingham. It was built to serve black patrons and is part of the Civil Rights District.

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