
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Lost Landmark: A Study of the Fate of the Allegheny Arsenal. By James Wudarczyk

SEPTEMBER 17, 1987, marks the 125th anniversary of the disastrous explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal, which claimed the lives of 78 persons. This tragedy was the worst civilian disaster in the history of the Civil War. While the Allegheny Arsenal was of major military importance, its role has been sadly neglected in the annals of local history. Equally sad is the fact that today only a few vestiges of its former glory remain to remind us of our heritage.

With the closing of Fort Lafayette (which replaced Fort Pitt at a downtown location), the government recognized the need to establish a new base of supplies. It was decided that the Arsenal should be near the foundries. Hence, William Barclay Foster and Colonel Abram R. Woolley were appointed by the government to choose a site for an arsenal. An account of the selection of the site is found in a report submitted to the House of Representatives on June 1, 1813, during the first session of the 13th Congress by Colonel Decius Wadsworth, the chief of Ordnance, in his plans for the extension of the Ordnance Department. An initial purchase of thirty acres was made on April 9, 1814, for the sum of \$12,000 from William Foster.¹

The Arsenal was established in the Lawrenceville area of Pittsburgh. With subsequent purchases in 1831, 1833, 1837 and 1867 the Arsenal covered approximately thirty-eight acres. It was bounded by the present Penn Avenue, 39th Street, 40th Street and the Allegheny River.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, one of the most talented architects in the country, was commissioned to design the great United States Arsenal. Six of Latrobe's elaborate drawings are housed in the Library of Congress, but differences between the proposed and actual structures reveal that many of his designs were altered. Talbot Hamlin in reviewing Latrobe's preliminary drawings finds them to be "among the most

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¹ Report of Lands and Buildings Acquired for Military Purposes submitted to the 16th Congress, 2nd Session, Document No. 203, by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun.

brilliant of the architect's designs; they are original, admirably fitted to their purpose, with clear, simple, and distinguished details. In these drawings more than anywhere else is embodied the most perfect expression of his later style, which so wonderfully combines austerity with grace and in spite of its simplicity avoids the mean or merely stark."²

Latrobe, however, left Pittsburgh prior to the completion of the project. His successor, Thomas Pope, whom Latrobe described in a letter of June 9, 1814, to Colonel Woolley, as a "most respectable man in his private character,"³ is believed to have been forced to alter Latrobe's designs because of financial considerations. Pope also left prior to the completion of the Arsenal.

The earliest known description of the facilities is found in Israel Rupp's 1846 *Early History of Western Pennsylvania* in which the author contends that "of three or four principal points that were fixed upon for establishing large Arsenals of construction, at which munitions appertaining to the ordnance department might be collected by purchase and fabrication on the position occupied by the Allegheny Arsenal was deemed second to no other, in its convenience of location, for communicating with, and supplying large and important sections of exposed inland and maritime frontier."⁴ The source went on to say that "the superior means it possesses of selecting from among the numerous manufacturing establishments in its immediate vicinity, artisans of every description and of great skill, of procuring all the various materials required in the construction of arms and military equipments of all kinds, renders it one of the most important arsenals of construction in the United States."⁵

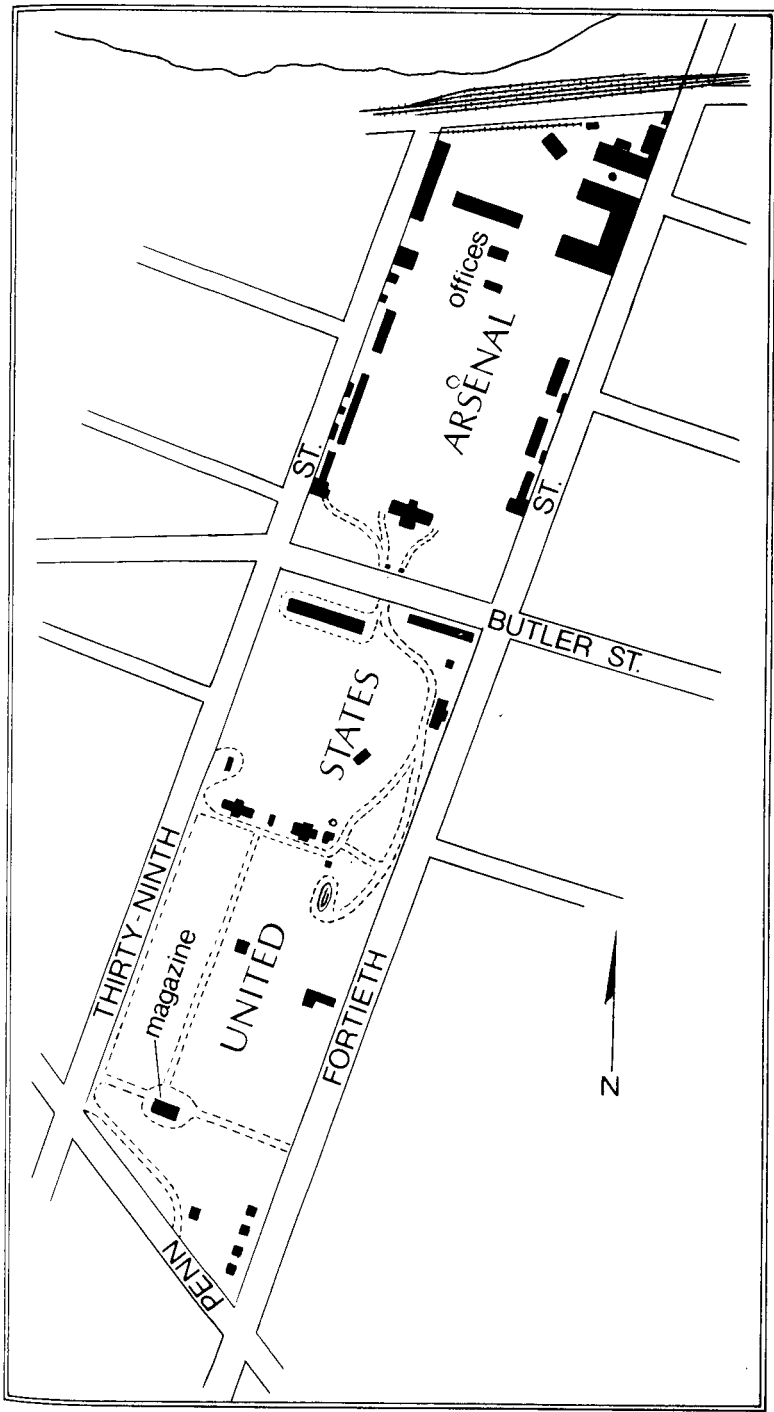
Butler Street divided the Arsenal into two parts, with the upper park containing brick stables, three small frame buildings, and a powder magazine with storage capacity for 1300 barrels. The lower park was the heart of the arsenal with a three stories high stone military store, two carriage and three timber sheds, the main arsenal or magazine of arms, a three stories high building with a tower that was forty feet square at the base and 120 feet high, officer's quarters, barracks, armory, smithy, carriage shop, machine shop, paint shop and accoutrement shop. Total cost of the construction of the Arsenal was \$300,000, a phenomenal sum for the period.

2 Talbot Hamlin, *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* (New York, 1955), 419-20.

3 *Ibid.*, 419.

4 Israel Rupp, *Early History of Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1846), 318-19.

5 *Ibid.*, 319.



Allegheny Arsenal

By 1825 the Allegheny Arsenal had established its position of economic and social importance in Pittsburgh. Among the most important early visitors to the Arsenal was the Marquis de Lafayette, who toured the grounds on June 2, 1825. Lafayette had breakfast with Major Churchill, inspected the grounds, then proceeded to Pittsburgh in a grand parade.⁶

Another important visitor to the facilities was U.S. Senator and former President John Quincy Adams, who toured the grounds on November 18, 1843, where he was "received and temperately entertained by Captain and Mrs. Harding."⁷

Evidence exists to indicate that there was experimentation with fireworks at the U.S. Arsenal. Alexander McBride, who was affiliated with the Arsenal until 1865, kept two notebooks. His notebook, dated July 1856, was a detailed account of formulas for making fireworks, including compositions for making large wheels, spiral wheels, the American shield, a Federal arch, and an American flag.⁸

Among the officers to command the Allegheny Arsenal, the one to achieve the most fame was Captain Thomas Jackson Rodman. Rodman, who was noted for revolutionizing the concept of artillery during the Civil War, was affiliated with the Allegheny Arsenal in 1841 until the outbreak of the Civil War, with the exception of a brief period during the Mexican War.

Perhaps the commander whose tenure was most marked by controversy was Major John Symington. While there was nothing in Symington's personal record to indicate that he was anything less than loyal to the Union cause, several unfortunate circumstances led to his eventual removal as commander. The first incident occurred on December 23, 1860, when Secretary of War John Floyd ordered the shipping of cannon and small arms to New Orleans and Texas ports. Symington only acted on orders, but soap-box orators and local publications were very critical of the commander. Evidence of the discontent of local residents was probably best shown by the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of December 25, 1860, which wrote, "The traitors of the South are thus being furnished by a government in league with them with all the ammunitions of war."⁹ Two days later the same publication was encouraging the citizens of Pittsburgh to arm themselves,

6 *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 3, 1825.

7 Ronald P. Goodfellow, "Old Man Eloquent Visits Pittsburgh," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 28 (Sept. 1945).

8 Notebook of Alexander McBride, July 1856, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

9 *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, Dec. 25, 1860.

because the government was no longer to be trusted to act in their defense. Although the order to ship the guns was eventually countermanded, the suspicions against Symington were never eliminated.

Alexander McBride, at the turn of the century, recalled that the feelings of the people were aroused when one of Colonel Symington's daughters wore a Confederate rosette to church one day. According to McBride, Symington was from Maryland and had a son who served with the Confederacy.¹⁰

The downfall of Symington, however, was the disastrous explosion of September 17, 1862. One of the most complete sources existing on the tragedy are the issues of the *Daily Post* published between September 18th and 29th of 1862. The journal spared no description of the scene, reporting that "of the main building nothing remained but a heap of smoldering debris."¹¹ Another account of the explosion was the Reverend Richard Lea's funeral oration, in which he praised the heroism of many who rushed to aid the victims and lamented the tragic deaths that occurred that fateful day. Reverend Lea noted, "Nothing but masses of flesh and charred bones remaining of what, such a short time before, was life and beauty."¹²

A coroner's inquest was impaneled to study the disaster. As late as 1882 the jury's contradictory verdict prevailed over the military's own inquest. The verdict of the majority, after giving the usual preface and the names of the dead, concludes as follows:

The jurors aforesaid present that said explosion was caused by neglect of Col. John Symington, the officer in command at the Allegheny Arsenal, and his lieutenants, J. R. Edie and Jasper Myers; and the gross neglect of Alex. McBride, superintendent of said laboratory building and his assistant, James Thorpe.

Signed by four of the jurors, H. Donaldson, John Lowe, F. C. Negley, Henry Snowden.

The other verdict of September 27, 1862, was as follows:

From so much of the foregoing finding as imputes negligence to Colonel Symington and Lieutenants Myers and Edie, we utterly and entirely dissent. The testimony in our judgment clearly discloses that the sad disaster is to be attributed solely to a disregard by the superintendents of the wholesome and stringent orders of Colonel Symington; and we are unable to find anything in the evidence criminating either of his lieutenants.¹³

Symington was relieved of his post on November 1, 1862. He was

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, May 5, 1901.

¹¹ *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, Sept. 18, 1862.

¹² Dedication Ceremony Booklet Honoring the New Monument in Allegheny Cemetery, May 27, 1928, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

¹³ Index to Reports of Committees of the House of Representatives for the First Session of the Forty-Seventh Congress, 1881-1882, Report No. 1434.

on sick leave from that date until June 1, 1863, when he officially retired from the service. Symington was unemployed from then until his death on April 4, 1864, in Harford County, Maryland.¹⁴

Although no one knows the reason for the explosion, one common theory is that the workers were lax in dealing safely with gunpowder and a spark from a mule's hoof set off the first of three explosions that destroyed the laboratory. This was never proven but the negligence theory may have some validity. Charles Puder, in his "memories of Lawrenceville," points out that his great-grandfather worked at the Arsenal, and his grandfather, John P. Driesch, would carry a noon meal in a lunchbox each day. According to Mr. Puder, his grandfather upon leaving would fill up the lunch bucket with gunpowder and take it home. Charles Puder writes, "He and the other boys would then wet it and roll it into a candle about 2" in diameter and about 12" high. This they would put on the hill where the retirement apartment building [Plaza] is behind Saint Augustine's Church on 36th Street and light it. It would burn slowly with a bright light and light up that portion of Lawrenceville with a spreading glow."¹⁵

In 1868 manufacturing ceased at the Allegheny Arsenal but the facilities continued to be used for storage of army supplies. It was in the same year that Lawrenceville was incorporated into the city of Pittsburgh.

During the bloody railroad riots of July 1877, the Allegheny Arsenal played a minor role. Major General Robert M. Brinton and his state militia were denied entrance since the commander of the post did not want to get involved in what he considered to be a local dispute.¹⁶

As late as 1901 numerous historical artifacts were housed at the Allegheny Arsenal. Historical cannon included five bronze guns of about 3-inch caliber. Four were captured from the English and the fifth was presented to the government by Count and Field Marschall de Rochambeau, commander of the French forces in the United States during the Revolutionary War.¹⁷ Other inventory items included 20,000 sabers, 4,500 Springfield rifles, carbines, samples of guns from the Napoleonic wars, and weapons from the Harpers Ferry Arsenal from 1811.¹⁸

14 John L. Carnprobst, "Tragedy at the U.S. Allegheny Arsenal," *Blue and Gray* (Sept.-Oct. 1985): 39.

15 Charles Puder, "Memories of Lawrenceville," *The Augustine* (Jan. 1980), 8.

16 *Pittsburgh Post*, July 23, 1877.

17 *The Pittsburgh Leader*, Oct. 13, 1901.

18 *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, May 4, 1901.

The last clash between federal officials and local authorities occurred in 1903 when William Henry Cowley, 19, was shot by a guard in the vicinity of the Arsenal. When Cowley died the following day, local authorities demanded that the guard, Private John Dowd, be turned over to them to be tried for manslaughter. The commanding officer refused, contending that Dowd was under arrest and would be tried by court martial. Dowd was found innocent after arguing that a few weeks prior to the tragic incident vandals had been stealing copper from the Arsenal. He maintained that he mistakenly thought Cowley was a vandal.

By the turn of the century, the necessity of maintaining the Allegheny Arsenal was being seriously questioned. Local sentiment, however, was instrumental in persuading the government to maintain the facilities. In 1906 the name of the Arsenal was changed to the Pittsburgh Storage and Supply Depot. Shortly after, the government began to parcel out portions of the upper Arsenal. On March 12, 1907, a five-year lease was signed between the U.S. Treasury Department and the City of Pittsburgh to use the land as a park. A cornerstone for a Marine Hospital was laid on December 16, 1908, on the property nearest Penn Avenue.

Demolition of structures on the lower grounds began in December 1917 when the army formulated plans to build new warehouse facilities. There was such fear of sabotage during this period that Robert Gray, former inspector of the Pittsburgh police bureau, organized a squad of twelve men to preserve order among the workers and to be alert for German spies.¹⁹

In 1926 the government divested itself of all the Arsenal properties and an era came to an end. Today only a few remnants of wall exist. The once proud powder magazine is reduced to a park comfort station. As late as the early 1960s the commander's house was still standing, but alas this too succumbed to urban modernization. A house from 1866 is one of the remaining structures, while a Greek revival building, circa the 1830s, remains sorely neglected.

Even the much acclaimed Butler Street Gatehouse, built about 1857,²⁰ that came to symbolize the Arsenal, was demolished in the 1940s. There were plans to re-erect the building elsewhere and the stones were saved for a number of years. However, they were later used to build retaining walls and for parking lot filler. As noted archi-

¹⁹ Pittsburgh *Sun Telegraph*, Mar. 5, 1918.

²⁰ Report of Principal Operations at the Allegheny Arsenal during the year ended June 30, 1857, Library of Congress.

Butler Street Gatehouse, Allegheny Arsenal



tectural historian James Van Trump lamented, "I am afraid that they are now so scattered that it would be hopeless to try to re-assemble them."²¹

There were some successful efforts to obtain plaques for the area to note its historical significance. Today the southern portion above Butler Street is used as a public school, health center and park, while the northern section is primarily a shopping and industrial complex. One must agree with Arthur Ziegler and James Van Trump's assessment that the Arsenal is probably beyond restoration but the area does need more study as some of Pittsburgh's important early architectural monuments.²² ■

²¹ Letter from James Van Trump to James Wudarczyk, June 8, 1976.

²² James D. Van Trump and Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr., *Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1967), 77.