

Camp Chaffee Historic District
Holly Hope
October 14, 2017



Welcome to the Walks through history tour of Camp Chaffee Historic District.

The AHPP offers Walks Through History and Sandwiching in History tours once a month. Our next Sandwiching in history tour will be at noon on November 3 at the Pulaski County Courthouse in Little Rock and our next walks tour will be Dumas Downtown Historic District in Dumas on November 11.

Thanks to Chaffee Crossing Historic District and Barbershop Museum for hosting our walks tour today. Thanks to Museum Curator Rod Williamson for his help as well.

The Camp Chaffee Historic District was listed on the National Register 9/23/2011. An addendum to the district was approved April 2015, which added nine resources to the boundaries.

The original district was bounded by Terry Street on the north, Ward Avenue on the east, Ellis St. on the south and Darby Avenue on the west. At that time the district contained 46 buildings, 2 of which have been destroyed.

The amended district expanded the boundaries to the north of Ward Avenue. The resources are located on Ward Avenue, Terry St., Redwood Drive, Taylor Avenue and two railroad spur lines form the southeastern boundary.

The district and amendment were listed because of their association with the event of World War II and the resulting construction of home front facilities in Arkansas.

Our agenda is to tour the barracks building, which will house the military museum in the future, the Creative Arts Network where you will learn about the artist's co-op housed in a former barrack. From there you are free to visit the Military Museum and the Barbershop Museum.

When Britain and France declared war against Germany in 1939 President Franklin Roosevelt was faced with building up armaments and troops. He knew this would not be well-received because the

Neutrality Act of 1935 prevented him from aiding Britain and France with American troops.

So in order to get America in a state of readiness he said that providing arms would offer employment for Americans by creating the weapons at home. In addition civilians and American ships would be protected because the purchasers would have to transport goods on their own vessels.

He further argued that the US would be less likely to enter the war if those nations that were invaded received the materiel they needed to defend themselves. The Neutrality Act would not be breached if America sent supplies but no troops - this was a peacetime mobilization phase.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, which prompted the declaration of war on the Empire of Japan and the declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Italy, the isolationist sentiment changed and America began the industrial mobilization phase.

At this point plans were implemented to establish training centers for troops and industrial support. Projected requirements for 1941 were provision of all articles for an Army and Air Corps numbering 1.2 million and industrial plants that could supply over four million troops.

Arkansas offered itself up for manufacturing and training but it was a sluggish start at first. Governor Carl Bailey formed the Arkansas Industrial Committee under the Arkansas Chamber of Commerce to accumulate data on Arkansas resources and how to utilize them to

attract federal development. This was the first state in the nation to do so.

He sent a representative to sit on the board of the Southwide Industrial Mobilization Committee in Washington, he encouraged the state board of education to coordinate with the U.S. office in a search for vocational training facilities to train military and civilians.

Despite all this the state didn't get much federal consideration because of expensive electricity and weak political influence after the death of Senator Joe T. Robinson in 1937. The workforce was considered uneducated and there was a deficiency of capital, research and training facilities so there was an initial lack of confidence in Arkansas on the part of the War Department.

By 1940 Arkansas was finally under consideration for defense construction. 1941 Governor Homer Adkins had continued Bailey's work to attract military facilities by holding a statewide conference in Little Rock to organize efforts to bring in defense industries. He was also aided by Representative William Norrell and representative Clyde Ellis among other state politicians.

Training facilities in Arkansas began with pilot training. The weather was key to attracting these schools because it was possible to achieve more flying days in the state; also, the level topography in many areas was ideal.

The weather was also ideal for facilities that trained ground troops for combat. Two sites for that purpose in Arkansas were considered, Camp Pike in North Little Rock (later Camp Robinson) and a site near Fort Smith.

The WWII site in Fort Smith took its place in a long history of military facilities centered in the area. In 1817 sixty-four riflemen were sent to Belle Point, which was located in the future Fort Smith at the confluence of Arkansas and Poteau Rivers. Their job was to keep the peace between the Cherokee and the Osage.

In 1846 a garrison was built in the location. During the Mexican War it was used as a supply depot for men headed southwest.

In the Civil War the fort was occupied by Confederate and Union troops. In 1871 the fort was decommissioned and it was not until 1941 that the area saw additional military development with the construction of Camp Chaffee.

In March 1941 the *Southwest American* reported that three sites in the vicinity of Fort Smith were being investigated by the War Department for construction of an army camp and defense industries. A colonel from the Seventh Corps area had visited and reported favorably on Fort Smith.

Draws for the Army would have been the water, coal, transportation, communication and natural gas. However, there were no immediate plans for construction because at that time additional camps were not required to house the federal troop goal of 1, 400,000 men. The army planned on hiking the number of pilots from 12,000 a year to 30,000 a year.

The Fort Smith airport had been inspected by a representative of the Gulf Coast region and Leigh Kelley, chairman of the Fort Smith airport commission and chairman of the chamber of commerce defense

committee said that negotiations had been going on for more than a week in April of 1941.

Even though formal announcement of an installation was still months away, municipal and federal officials proceeded with preparations as though the army had approved the location. The city engineering and water department drew up tentative plans to extend city water mains six miles southeast of Fort Smith to the area under consideration. The community of Barling was one of the sites that had been surveyed.

In May War Department approval for construction of a facility for training troops for combat and preparation for deployment had been granted, but this was still contingent on an increase in the size of the army. Representatives of the Missouri Pacific Railroad had conferred with survey officials. Engineers from the construction engineering company of Black and Veatch of Kansas City, Missouri made topographical and terrain maps and a planning expert from Camp Robinson had met with the railroad.

To make the area more attractive to the War Department a federal official recommended that a four-lane concrete highway should be constructed from Fort Smith to the camp, a housing bureau should be established and plans for the recreational and religious needs of the soldiers should be met.

In response Fort Smith Mayor Chester Holland and the chamber of commerce requested that people with houses, apartments or rooms to rent list them with the chamber because a camp would add about 12,000 to the population. Holland also conjectured that it would be

necessary to add six to 12 men to the police department and the water department announced it would permit a doubling of its present output of city water from Lake Fort Smith to the army camp. The postmaster stated that a sub-station would probably be established at the camp as well.

Studies on the feasibility of a Farm Security Administration resettlement for displaced farm families were conducted in June of 1941. At this point it was revealed that IF the camp were constructed it would house trainees for an armored division but The War Department was still being coy about it.

By July of 1941 the prospective camp had already had an impact on Barling, which was established circa 1888 as Spring Hill. The name was changed later because there was already a community called spring Hill and the post office needed a different designation so they called it Barling after an early homesteading family.

Although the official announcement had not occurred, United States engineers and about 140 employees of Black and Veatch had taken up residence in the area to conduct surveys. Business men had offers to sell or lease their operations, a new movie theater was in the plans and an enlarged telephone exchange was planned.

Between 15-20 new homes had been built and a car trailer park had sprung up for workers and family from other defense construction projects. Workers from Missouri were quoted as saying they had been told by the personnel director to come to Barling for the construction job there.

In August of 1941 the first official declaration of an army camp at Barling was announced by the Seventh Zone Quartermaster. Lump sum bids would be advertised and 2 million dollars was available for the start of construction.

At that point an auxiliary highway between Fort Smith and Barling with connection to the Fort Smith airport began. It was described as dust-proof with an oil-top over gravel and was built with the cooperation of Sebastian County, the state highway department and the WPA.

Railroad facilities were amended to the existing Paris branch of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. The camp received a "Y" intersection with the mainline, two classification tracks, two switching leads, two double-ended tracks, two crossovers and nine spurs.

Black and Veatch set up in the Geren Building in Fort Smith and generated 200,000 square feet of blue print and 300 books of specifications for the 900 buildings making up the \$17,000.00 first phase of construction. The division would initially quarter 15,400 men and 750 officers.

The army camp would be named Camp Chaffee after Major General Adna Romanza Chaffee. Chaffee was a 1906 graduate of West Point and is known as the father of the armored command. He is also credited with developing the basic doctrine of mechanized warfare.

In 1931 Chaffee was appointed as a lieutenant colonel and he was assigned to command the 1st cavalry Mechanized regiment at Fort Knox, KY. He served as overall commander of the 1st Cavalry, establishing, training and organizing the Army's first dedicated armored unit. Through his influence he was able to get increased funding for mechanization. In the late 1930s he refined and further developed

American armor doctrine including combining armored, infantry and artillery operations. In 1940 he was named commander of the armored force with responsibility for all infantry tank and mechanized cavalry units, as well as supporting artillery, motorized infantry and engineer units. He created the 1st and 2nd armored divisions and was promoted to major general before his death in 1941.

Army organization tables described an armored division as being composed of approximately 13,000 men, 650 officers equipped with 13-ton and 27-ton tanks, scout cars, gun carriers and other motor vehicles.

The plans for Camp Chaffee included armored division housing, housing for two tank battalions, an 834 bed hospital, warehouses and utilities. Contract plans and specifications were sent out to eight prospective bidders. A. Farnell Blair of Decatur, Georgia agreed to the contract and they completed the initial construction and layout of the camp.

Armored division housing on the east side of the camp was the beginning of the construction, which lasted through 1943. Construction on housing for two tank destroyer battalions was phase two of the cantonment and it began in March 1942 under prime contractor Leck-Jensen Construction Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota. This section of housing would quarter 2,072 enlisted men and officers.

The differences between a tank that an armored division would use and a tank destroyer were that the armored division would use a tank like the Sherman M4 with a shorter gun - at 30 caliber - and the sides of

the tank were flat with sloped rear decks. Being flat they didn't deflect enemy fire very well.

The tank destroyer had 76 mm or 90 mm guns found on the M10 or M36. The sides on the destroyers were angled and flat rear decks.

One thousand buildings had been erected by 7,000 men at the date of completion in May 1942. Enlisted men had previously arrived at Chaffee on the day Pearl Harbor was bombed, December 7, 1941.

The camp was turned over to the army on March 29, 1942 and the first troop train arrived in that month with 600 men of the Sixth Armored Division from Fort Knox, Kentucky. It had taken less than seven months to build facilities for 55,000 men.

On Armed Forces Day, April 6, 1942, over 10,000 troops of the division participated in a 12-mile long procession with more than 500 mobile units along Garrison Avenue.

The Sixth Armored Division trained at Chaffee for 8 months then was shipped to Europe. It was replaced by the Fourteenth and Sixteenth divisions, each of which spent one year at the camp. All three divisions were serving in combat in Europe by the end of the war.

In June, 1942 the 817th and 819th Tank Destroyer Battalions were activated at Chaffee. The 819th battalion trained there until December, 1942 when they were shipped to Texas and then California. The battalion had to relearn tactics in Hawaii because of new tanks, then was stationed in the Marshall Islands. In September 1945 the entire battalion was awarded the Bronze Star for participation in the Western Pacific Campaign.

The 817th battalion was converted to a towed battalion in 1943 and was shipped to Greenock, Scotland in 1944. They then engaged in battle in Hurtgen Forest, Harz Mountains, the Roer River, the Rhine River and the Mulde River in Germany until 1945 when offensive operations ceased.

Aft the end of WWII the need for tank destroyer battalions ended and the barracks at Chaffee were converted to the armored division.

Chaffee had several historic uses besides training of the armored division and battalions. The camp housed canine corps dogs and horses that served with range guards in 1942. In May 1943 the first Women's Army Corps member arrived. Otherwise known as WAC's they were the women's branch of the United States Army. They were the first women other than nurses to serve with the army.

They began as the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps – with two A's in the acronym but it was shortened to one A – WAC in 1943.

When Lt. Pauline Upshaw arrived at Chaffee there was no WAC housing planned so she was put up in the Guest House. In November four more female officers arrived.

Later an abandoned CCC camp on Taylor St. was converted to a WAC compound and the company officially took up residence in March 1944. WACs worked in the hospital and the main service unit until the camp was closed in 1946.

Camp Chaffee was also used to house German prisoners of war. Thousands of German and Italian POWs were brought into the United States in 1943. Concerns over sabotage led the government to utilize remote areas of existing military reservations for German prisoners in

the early stages. Chaffee was the first to accept prisoners in January 1943.

Eighty-three acres on the reservation were set aside for approximately 4,000 prisoners housed in three compounds. Initially Guards dragged abandoned or unused structures on the reservation to the camp for use by the POW's.

Three prison compounds contained 34 barracks, four latrines, four mess halls, four orderly rooms, a canteen, a dayroom, a dispensary, a workshop, and a recreation area. The compounds were separated by a single fence and all three were surrounded by a ten foot high fence. Eleven guard towers contained a team of three guards with machine guns and searchlights.

Under the Geneva Convention prisoners could be required to work as long as it was not dangerous and did not involve assembly of military equipment. Prisoners at Chaffee constructed the porch, patio and stairs at the Maness schoolhouse and other stone resources around the cantonment as well as agricultural work for local farmers.

The camp remained active after the war as prisoners were repatriated. By 1946 they were down to 1,193 prisoners and in May of that year all were transferred.

In August 1944 Camp Chaffee became a War Department Personnel Center. It was used to process new arrivals into the army and to assign them as well as to assist in the mustering out process. In January 1946 the 100,000th man was discharged at Chaffee. By July 1946 the base was placed on inactive status though it was still a military installation.

The installation would be opened and closed eight additional times. From 1948 to 1957 it was home of the Fifth Armored Division. In 1956 it had been designated as Fort Chaffee, which means it was a more permanent installation than a camp would be. In 1959 the home of the US Army Training Center, Field Artillery moved from Chaffee to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

From 1960-61 the fort housed the 100th Infantry Division. In 1961 the fort was declared inactive and was placed on caretaker status but was reactivated several times through 1974.

In 1975 Fort Chaffee was a processing center for 50,809 refugees from Southeast Asia. It contained refugees of the Vietnam War for one year providing them with medical screenings, matching them with sponsors and arranging for their residence in the United States.

In 1980 the fort became a Cuban refugee resettlement center. During that time a number of refugees rioted and burned two buildings. Fort Chaffee processed 25,390 Cuban refugees.

The histories of both of these groups are outlined in exhibits in the military museum.

The Joint Readiness Training Center began training soldiers at Chaffee in 1987 until it was transferred to Fort Polk, Louisiana in 1993.

In 1995 the Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended closure of the fort. This was approved with the condition that certain areas were maintained as reserve component training enclaves. In that year Chaffee became a sub installation of Fort Sill. Later that year the federal government declared over 7,000 acres of the original installation as surplus and the land was turned over to the state. The

remaining acreage was turned over to the Arkansas National Guard for training facilities.

Command was transferred to the Arkansas Army National Guard in 1997 and Fort Chaffee became the Chaffee Maneuver Training Center for Light Combat Forces.

The Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority was established to redevelop the acres turned over to the state. This included demolishing over 700 buildings and rezoning land. The authority is currently overseeing residential, commercial and industrial projects in what is now known as Chaffee Crossing.

If you are interested in learning about Elvis Presley's famous haircut while he was stationed here in 1958 you need to visit the Barbershop Museum. Other high-profile civilian uses of the fort were the filming of the 1984 movie "A Soldier's Story", the movie "Biloxi Blues" and the 1995 movie "The Tuskegee Airmen". Information on these events is in the military museum across the way.

Other areas you might want to visit after you explore the museums are the 1943 amphitheater, the Janet Huckabee Nature Center off of Wells Lake Road and the Manness Schoolhouse, which houses a restaurant if you are hungry.