

Sandwiching in History Tour Fort Logan H. Roots Circle Drive, North Little Rock

September 1, 2023

By Ashley Sides Special thanks to: Arlo Taylor



Building 1 at Fort Roots, built in 1896 as a 130-man enlisted barracks. Photo by Ashley Sides, 2023

Welcome

Thank you for coming to our Sandwiching in History tour at old Fort Roots. I want to thank the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System for welcoming us to their North Little Rock campus, and thank you especially to Arlo Taylor, who has been so positive and helpful in making this tour work.

I would also like to thank a couple of our regular Sandwiching in History tour participants, Danny and Pat Scruggs, for lending me some history on Fort Roots, which was incredibly helpful to me as I put this tour together. Their family has four generations of history working with Fort Roots and the VA—that's over 100 years of roots at Fort Roots! Others of you all might have personal connections here too, so I hope you'll enjoy the tour in a special way, and I also hope you'll correct me if I mix something up and you know better!

Introduction

Here we are up on Big Rock Mountain. This prominent hill juts up from the landscape right in the way of the Arkansas River, forcing it to bend away to the south. No surprise that this place has held importance for people for centuries. The native Quapaws pointed it out to French explorer Jean-Baptiste Bénard de la Harpe as a landmark for navigation and trade as he investigated the region for France in 1722. In fact, he stopped here, climbed to the top, and named this hill *le Rocher Français*, or the "French Rock." Early French travelers also called it *le Grand Rocher*, the "Big Rock."

La Harpe thought it could make a good stone quarry, and he was right about that, as it later did. Did the Frenchman also envision a fortress atop this hill? After all, a promontory like this with such a commanding view of the river and the surrounding countryside—if La Harpe had encountered it in Europe, it might very well have had a castle on top of it. If the thought of a fort did cross his mind, he would have guessed correctly there as well.

Big Rock Mountain was chosen as the site of a United States military post in 1893. It wasn't exactly for *local* defense, and it certainly wasn't a castle. The fort housed and trained troops for a quarter century, and for another century since that time, it has been a hospital for military veterans.

There are actually two overlapping historic districts up here, one corresponding to the original Fort Logan H. Roots Military Post, and the other to the entire North Little Rock Veterans Administration Hospital complex that grew up out of it and around it later on. For the sake of keeping this tour manageable, we will focus on the original fort, which is primarily composed of the brick buildings you see along the circular drive surrounding this open field. We'll cover the history of this district while we are gathered here, and then we'll walk the perimeter of the parade grounds and look at the buildings closer up.

Origins of the Military Post on Big Rock

In the 1870s, part of this hill was being used for agriculture, including orchards and a vineyard. In 1887, Dr. E.V. Deuell realized that it would be a prime location for recreation, so he partnered with Col. Thomas Lafferty, who owned a large tract of land on the summit, and together they formed the Mountain Park Cottage Site Improvement Company to develop the area. They prepared scenic trails, platted the land for summer cottages, and opened a 30-room, two-story Mountain Park Hotel with a breathtaking view of Little Rock below. Mountain Park enjoyed five or six years of tourism success before Big Rock was given to the military. If Deuell and Lafferty were sad to see Mountain Park giving way to the military, they would have probably been in the minority. For Little Rock, this new army post was a hard-earned victory and the culmination of years of work. In 1890, the U.S. government had begun transitioning how federal troops were distributed throughout the country by closing numerous small posts and arsenals and concentrating troops in a few strategic locations for efficient deployment. The old U.S. Arsenal at 9th and Commerce in Little Rock—now MacArthur Park—was one of the outmoded installations that was to be decommissioned. When Little Rock officials heard the Arsenal was to close, they decided to try to land one of the twelve new major bases that the Department of War was planning to establish.

A committee was formed with the idea of turning the Arsenal into a city park and to lobby the government for one of the new military posts. Col. Logan H. Roots was the chair of this committee. Born in Illinois, Roots fought with Sherman for the Union in the Civil War, after which he settled in Arkansas, where he bought a plantation, served in politics including in the U.S. Congress, and invested in the mining, banking, and telephone industries. Roots was considered the wealthiest man and leading financier in the state. He was an ardent promoter of Arkansas for both investment and immigration. And as chair of the Joint Arsenal and Post Committee, he was instrumental in negotiating a deal whereby the federal government would turn the Arsenal property over to the City of Little Rock in exchange for land on which to build a new military post.

The government accepted this deal in 1892, but a suitable site was not selected until 1893. After eliminating several other potential locations, Big Rock was chosen, for a total of 1,100 acres encompassing the hill and some surrounding lowlands. They would have preferred Pulaski Heights, but the land was too expensive and couldn't be obtained in a single tract. Big Rock wasn't easily accessible until a good road was laid, and although it had the advantage of being near the railroad, it also had the disadvantage of being near "lawless" Argenta, which at the time had a reputation for gambling, drinking, and prostitution. In fact, once the base was established, Argenta was declared off limits for the soldiers.

Keep in mind that Big Rock Mountain and Argenta were part of Little Rock's Eighth Ward at that time. Little Rock had annexed the territory north of the river in 1890. So they were in a position to negotiate a handover of Big Rock to the federal government in exchange for the Arsenal.

In March of 1893 the deeds were signed and property was transferred. Just two months later, Col. Roots died of an illness at the age of 52. He never got to see the Big Rock Post that he had worked so hard for.

Ground was broken in December 1894 and the first buildings were constructed over the course of the year 1895. Twenty-seven buildings were authorized, for which Congress appropriated just under \$195,000, though not all buildings were constructed in this initial phase. Frederick Kepler of Chicago won the contract to build the buildings, and several other contractors were hired to do the grading, build the mountain road and post road, lay the flagstone, and install

the interior plumbing, the sewer system, the exterior water supply, and the heating for the officers' quarters and guardhouse. Other than the guardhouse, all the original buildings encircled the parade grounds or were on adjacent roads, and many of them still stand today.

The buildings do not necessarily hew to a specific architectural style. They were nineteenthcentury military buildings: they were functional first and foremost. They have a utilitarian structure, simple lines, and minimal ornamentation. Common motifs bring unity to the group of buildings: Solid red brick masonry walls; slender, double-hung windows with segmental arches and projecting cast stone sills; and trussed slate roofs of gable or cross-gable configuration are typical. Elements of the Romanesque Revival or the Greek Revival style are present on many of the buildings.

Fort Logan H. Roots and the Spanish–American War

The initial phase of construction was completed at Big Rock Post in 1896 and it was garrisoned by Companies E and G of the 11th U.S. Cavalry that July. In April 1897, an order from President McKinley formally changed the name of the post to honor the late Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Logan H. Roots.

About 20 of the originally planned buildings were constructed in the initial phase. Whatever the schedule had been for completing the original plans, construction seems to have been put on hold for a few years, probably because in April of 1898, the Spanish–American War broke out. Fort Roots soldiers were sent to Puerto Rico; other than appearing in local parades, this was their first real action since taking up the garrison.

Meanwhile, the state was raising additional volunteer regiments upon President McKinley's orders. But Fort Roots was too small to accommodate 2,000 additional men, so they mustered in at Camp Dodge, a temporary camp at the corner of Seventeenth Street and College Avenue in Little Rock, by the Oakland and Fraternal Cemeteries.

Although the United States won the Spanish–American War, the experience laid bare the U.S. military's lack of organization and preparedness befitting its new status as an imperial world power. The War Department underwent a review and subsequently began expanding its forces and modernizing its weaponry.

Fort Roots got a bump in prestige and attention in 1905. President Theodore Roosevelt visited the region and stopped by the post to review the troops. This was only the second visit to Arkansas by a sitting U.S. president, and it brought out huge, enthusiastic crowds.

Meanwhile that year, Fort Roots began to expand as a second phase of construction got underway to complete the original plans for the fort. By 1907, major construction was complete. The new buildings included an administration building (Building 32), post exchange and gymnasium (Building 33), two 65-man barracks (Buildings 34 and 37), each with their own kitchens/mess halls (Buildings 36 and 39) and lavatories (Buildings 35 and 38), commanding officer's quarters (Building 40), and 9-man bachelor officers' quarters (Buildings 32, 41, 54). These additional buildings resembled the earlier ones and were also located around the parade grounds.

Between 1912 and 1917, Fort Roots trained and deployed federal regiments and Arkansas National Guard companies as the United States dealt with instability and provocations along its southern border due to the revolution in Mexico.

World War I and the Change of Mission

In May 1917, Fort Roots, which to this point had been a minor army garrison, briefly expanded again, at least in its role. The United States had just entered the Great War—World War I—and for a brief time, military activity at Fort Roots reached a climax. It became one of the War Department's new Officers Training Camps.

At the same time, Congress passed the Selective Service Act requiring eligible men to register for the draft. The facilities at 1,100-acre Fort Roots were found to be insufficient to train the increased number of troops needed for such a large-scale war. The War Department began building larger training facilities around the country, and Central Arkansas was again selected for one of these sites. In June 1917, construction began on 13,000-acre Camp Pike (now Camp Joseph T. Robinson), and in September it was ready to receive trainees. The first draft of the Selective Service sent 10,000 men to Camp Pike, and within short order, those numbers had ballooned to 30,000, then over 50,000 men. Fort Roots's Officer Training Camp contributed the officers for the newly trained 87th Division at Camp Pike.

As a military post, Fort Roots had been eclipsed by Camp Pike. Its remaining troops now found themselves primarily guarding federal property until the next transition.

It was at this point, in the thick of the First World War, that Fort Roots was finding its new calling. There had always been a hospital building on the grounds—Building 11 was part of the initial 1896 batch of buildings. This two-story brick building with wrap-around porches on both floors was originally set up to accommodate 12 beds for patients. Even as the military's center of gravity shifted to Camp Pike, Fort Roots continued to serve as the army hospital for the area. However, with greater numbers of soldiers now coming and going at Camp Pike, and with ever increasing numbers of war wounded returning from the front, Fort Roots had to expand its hospital capacity to keep up.

By January 1918, the hospital already had 275 patients, mostly from Camp Pike, and work began to convert additional space to accommodate 1,000 patients and 69 nurses. New hospital wards were apparently created out of the former barracks.

Camp Pike ran a daily feature in the *Arkansas Gazette* that was called the "Camp Pike Gazette" in which they reported on activities at both Camp Pike and Fort Roots. One humorous story from January 3rd, 1918 gives a glimpse of the Fort Roots hospital at work:

"Communicates With Sick Via 'Wireless'"

All doubts of the efficiency of semaphore signaling as a method of communication have been removed from the mind of one civilian, who had the impression that the system was principally a form of light calisthenics. The visitor inquired at the receiving office at Fort Roots yesterday afternoon, asking to see a soldier friend who was in one of the innumerable wards. He was told that the soldier was in a contagious ward and could not be seen.

"How is he getting along?" the visitor asked.

"I'll find out," a sergeant said, and stepped out upon the porch.

Immediately the sergeant's arms shot up into the air, then spread out crosswise, went through the well known Indian club motions for a minute, and came to a stop.

Across the parade ground, a figure dim in the distance rose from a chair on the porch and replied in a set of similar motions.

"He says he's all right," said the sergeant, "except he's got the toothache."

Driving past the porch from which the patient answered, the visitor stopped and talked with the soldier. "I'm sorry you have the toothache," he said.

"Who said I had the toothache?" asked the soldier.

"The sergeant at the receiving office," replied the visitor.

"He used a little too liberal a translation," answered the soldier. "I told him my jaw hurt. I've got the mumps."¹

During the course of 1918, a catastrophic flu pandemic broke out. With crowded military bases, camps, and ships, and with soldiers traveling the globe, the world war accelerated the flu's spread. Meanwhile, governments suppressed the news about the growing public health crisis for fear of public panic and loss of wartime morale. Camp Pike and Fort Roots were at the epicenter of the pandemic in Arkansas. In a 2017 article in the Smithsonian called "How the

¹ Quoted in Storey, "Flu epidemic of 1918 a deadly doozy."

Horrific 1918 Flu Spread Across America," author John M. Barry paints a grim picture of our state in particular:

For an example of the press's failure, consider Arkansas. Over a four-day period in October, the hospital at Camp Pike admitted 8,000 soldiers. Francis Blake, a member of the Army's special pneumonia unit, described the scene: 'Every corridor and there are miles of them with double rows of cots ... with influenza patients ... There is only death and destruction.' Yet seven miles away in Little Rock, a headline in the Gazette pretended yawns: 'Spanish influenza is plain la grippe - same old fever and chills.'²

The War Department eventually counted 13,500 cases of flu at Camp Pike in a population of 54,500 soldiers. Four hundred sixty-six people in the camp died. You can imagine the related impact at the Fort Roots hospital, which was helping with the flu patients.

Fort Roots also served American servicemen who were coming home from war with longerterm health needs. Many had lost limbs, and many were mentally or emotionally traumatized. Some would be here for years and years to come. To better serve this constituency, Fort Roots was placed under the administration of the Public Health Service, and then in 1921 was transferred to the newly created Veterans Bureau. The Department of Veterans Affairs still operates the facilities at Fort Roots today, a century later.

Veterans Administration

And thus opened the second, and longer chapter of Fort Roots's history. It was an army post for all of a quarter century, but it's been a veterans' hospital for over 100 years now. That's a story worth telling, too, but we don't have time for it today. The original buildings associated with the fort's army days were designated the Fort Logan H. Roots Military Post Historic District in 1974. You'll pick them out as the red brick buildings surrounding the parade grounds. They form a small subset of the entire campus, which grew up in the years following the handover to the VA. And in 2012, the entirety of this much larger campus of the Eugene J. Towbin Healthcare Center—including the original Fort Roots buildings—was added to the National Register of Historic Places as the North Little Rock Veterans Administration Hospital Historic District.

The VA hospital saw immediate expansion, starting as early as 1923. These buildings are clearly distinguishable from the original red brick buildings of the fort. They feature straight lines and stucco, with no porches or chimneys. Other buildings in other styles were added in the following decades—one example of Depression-era WPA construction was the old gatehouse made of fieldstones. The main, huge hospital building was opened in 1983.

² Ibid.

One other change I'd like to point out is that over time, the original 1,100 acres of Fort Roots have been greatly reduced, and you'll be interested to know what came of it. In 1955, a 656-acre section was declared surplus and transferred to the City of North Little Rock as an addition to Burns Park. In 1972, another 85 acres was declared as surplus. A portion of this property became the home of the Pulaski Vocational Technical School, now UA – Pulaski Technical College, and another part of it was developed by the City of North Little Rock as Emerald Park. There were apparently other reductions in acreage as well, because the campus now sits on approximately 180 to 190 acres.

In a moment we will walk around the parade grounds and see the original Fort Roots buildings and find out additional details about some of them. We will start here and make a circle, ending back up at this spot. But while I have you all here, I want to go ahead and let you know about our upcoming tours.

Upcoming Tours

If you can, please join us on October 6th for our next in-person Sandwiching in History tour in Norfork, Arkansas, as we tour the Jacob Wolf House, the last remaining two-story dog-trot public structure in the United States. This historic site has recently undergone some renovations, including the addition of new interpretive panels inside the site's secondary structure, the John Wolf Cabin.

But coming up *this* month, as some of you may know, is the 75th anniversary of War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock! Keep an eye on the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's YouTube and social media pages for a special anniversary edition of our 2019 Sandwiching in History tour of War Memorial Stadium. (Some of you may have attended that tour in person!)

We have rerecorded it as a virtual tour. The video will include an updated script and plenty of historical tidbits from the War Memorial archives, the Arkansas State Archives and other agencies around the state. Kudos to Nathan Treece on all his hard work putting that video together for you!

Now if you will step over here with me, we'll start our walking tour, beginning with these buildings and working our way around Circle Drive, staying on the Parade Grounds to have a better view of them...

WALKING TOUR AROUND CIRCLE DRIVE

Assorted notes:

- Notice the numbering system. Smaller numbers are earlier buildings; bigger are later:
 - \circ 1–16 or so built by 1896
 - 20–40 or so built by 1907
 - 100+ starting from 1920s
 - o 50+ from 1930s-1940s
- The original Fort Roots buildings are now mostly used as admin buildings for the hospital system.
- The parade grounds were used for public demonstrations, yes, but also for training drills and other meetings with the troops and their commanding officers.
- The parade ground encompasses 11 acres.
- During the lean years of the Great Depression, "the hospital became an entity that was virtually self-contained. Patients farmed the land and raised hogs to supplement the food supply. The hospital had its own boiler plant which supplied heat, and its own fire and police departments." ("Chronicle of a Century")
- Post-WWII: "Because approximately 60% of the patients during this period had rural backgrounds, the farming operation proved to be therapeutic in nature. It brought about the rapid convalescence of many veterans. Several patients won many prizes at the Arkansas Livestock Show." ("Chronicle of a Century")
- "In addition to the farming activities, educational retraining was being established. Emphasis was placed on preparing the veteran to return to society, so many therapeutic measures were encouraged. Musical, literary, and journalistic talents were encouraged. Woodworking, printing, watch repairing and various graphic arts were taught. Reading on many levels was encouraged by a progressive library service." ("Chronicle of a Century")
- In recent years, people have enjoyed coming up here to Fort Roots to watch the Fourth of July fireworks in the city below.

Notes to the Buildings:

Bldgs. 12, 13, 14, 24, 40 – OFFICERS QUARTERS

- These five houses are along a semi-private drive that runs off of Circle Drive to the west (West Drive).
- Bldg. 40 Commanding Officers' Quarters
 - \circ 1907; ca. 8,800 ft²; ca. \$14,000
- Bldg. 12, 13, 14 Officers' Quarters
 - 1896; ca. 13,000 ft²; ca. \$14,000
 - Identical duplexes; Each red brick building is cross-gabled with the front-facing gable dominating the front façade. A one-story porch extends across each front façade, and two pairs of rounded arch windows in the upper gable ends give the buildings a Romanesque Revival influence

Bldg. 41 – Bachelor Officers' Quarters

• 1907; ca. 32,000 ft²; ca. \$32,000

Bldg. 32 – Administration Building

• 1905; ca. 6,800 ft²; ca. \$10,900

Bldg. 58 – General Medical and Surgical Unit of Hospital

- 1932; ca. 70,000 ft²; ca. \$171,000
- Now vacant. Will undergo renovation to be put to new use.

(**Bldg. 101** – in background, behind Bldg. 58 – Hospital Building. Typical example of 1920s construction)

Bldg. 37/34 – 65-Man Barracks

- Two barracks built in second phase of construction. Very similar.
- 1907/1906; ca. 28K/26K ft²; ca. \$26,800
- Behind Bldg. 37/34:

Bldgs. 35/38 and 36/39 – Ancillary Structures to 65-Man Barracks #37 and #34

- Bldg. 35/38 Lavatories; 1907; ca. 4,000 ft²; ca. \$5,900
- Bldg. 36/39 Mess Halls / Kitchens; 1907; ca. 9,300 ft²; ca. \$8,900

Bldg. 33 – Post Exchange and Gym

- 1906; ca. 15,000 ft²; ca. \$23,000
- One of the best examples of the Greek Revival style on the post is exhibited in this building's portico.
- In later years used as a multi-purpose facility: meetings, training, retirement parties, etc.; Now HR Management Services

Water Tower

• The old water tower to the right was built in 1911 with a capacity of 150,000 gallons.

Bldg. 1 – Enlisted Barracks

- This was the original 130-man enlisted barracks, completed in 1896 at cost of \$22,500. (ca. 45,000 ft²)
- As you can see, it's the most prominent structure facing the parade ground.
- Architecture
 - Three-story central block with a hipped roof and cross-gable, flanked by twostory hipped roof wings on either side; Central front-facing cross-gable is embellished with decorative brick corbelling and recessed brick panels
 - Two-story porch extends the full length of the building's front façade
 - $\circ~$ Each side elevation is decorated by a chimney, but chimney doesn't go all the way to the ground

- Some restrained elements of the Greek Revival style
- Behind Bldg. 1:

Bldgs. 2, 3, 4 – Ancillary Structures to the Barracks

- Bldg. 2 & 4 Mess Hall / Kitchen; 1896; ca. 6,300 ft²; \$4,138
- Bldg. 3 Lavatory; 1896; 3,830 ft²; \$4,281

Bldg. 5 – Stockade (Guard House?)

- 1896; ca. 9,000 ft²; ca. \$6,000
- Originally served as the stockade (guard house?). Later became the canteen. Then was used as a library. (Now office of Regional Counsel)
- Has unique hipped roof topped by square cupola and hipped-roof dormer with exposed rafter tails.
- One-story front porch and symmetrical façade shows a Greek Revival-style influence.

Buildings along Hill Drive. – Supply and Service Buildings

- Bldg. 22 Fire Station
 - 1901; ca. 1,500 ft²; ca. \$2,200
 - The only building that is still being used for its original purpose—still the fire station today!
- Bldg. 6 Bakery (Now Firefighters Dormitory); 1896; ca. 4,300 ft²; ca. \$3,000
- Bldg. 7 Quartermaster & Commissary Storehouse; 1896; ca. 11,000 ft²; ca. \$8,200
- Bldg. 8 Quartermaster Stables; 1896; ca. 7,200 ft²; ca. \$5,300
 30-mule capacity
- Bldg. 16 Blacksmith, Carpenter, and Paint Shop; 1896; ca. \$2,700

Bldg. 11 – Hospital

- 1896; ca. 17,000 ft²; ca. \$14,000
- Initially accommodated only 12 beds
- Wraparound porches on both stories—Fresh air and sunshine were considered important remedies at turn of 20th century. Patients were regularly taken out on the porches.
- Porches were much more ornate originally. When built, they featured "Y-shaped" supports characteristic of Victorian Stick-style architecture and a decorative railing, but they were later replaced with slender round columns and a simple metal balustrade.

Bldg. 15 – More Officers' Quarters

- 1896; ca. 4,000 ft²; ca. \$2,900
- Single-family NCO dwelling
- Smaller and more simplistic than the officers' quarters on the west side, it is an unpretentious, two-story, box-like structure of red brick with a single-story front porch.

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