

3-28-1850

Armory and foundry at Fort Massac. (To accompany bill H.R. no. 32)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indian and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

H.R. Report No. 214, 31st Congress, 1st Sess. (1850)

This House Report is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact darinfox@ou.edu.

ARMORY AND FOUNDRY AT FORT MASSAC.

[To accompany bill H. R. No. 32.]

MARCH 28, 1850.

Mr. RICHARDSON, from the Committee on Military Affairs, made the following

REPORT:

The Committee on Military Affairs, to whom was referred the "bill to establish an armory and foundry at Fort Massac, on the Ohio river," have had the same under consideration, and respectfully report:

The subject of this bill has engaged public attention, more or less, for more than thirty years, and in the mean time has elicited a very general expression of public opinion. That opinion is altogether favorable to the object of the bill. No one acquainted with the subject will scarcely doubt now, that if the system of public manufacture of small arms, ordnance, projectiles, and other appendages of war, is to be continued, a national armory and foundry should be established for that purpose, at a suitable point west of the Alleghany mountains. The reasons calling for such an institution are ably and elaborately set forth in numerous documents, to be found among the public archives. The committee refer the House to these documents for a fuller view of the subject than they are prepared or deem necessary to present at this time. Wishing, however, to present the subject in a condensed and forcible form, they have adopted the following communication of the Hon. John A. McClernand, of Illinois, to a member of this committee, for that purpose. This communication traces the history of the measure accurately, and exhibits in a clear and satisfactory manner the material considerations urged in favor of its adoption.

WASHINGTON CITY, March 14, 1850.

SIR: Presuming upon your indulgence, I have taken the liberty to address you the following views upon the subject of a bill for the establishment of a national armory upon the western waters, lately referred, at my instance, to the committee of which you are a member. My apology for thus intruding upon your attention is the interest I feel in the measure, as one of deep and permanent importance to the Union, and especially to the people of the Mississippi valley, among whom my constituents are numbered.

The project of a national armory, to be located upon the western waters, originated as far back as 1818, when Mr. Calhoun, as Secretary of War,

reported in favor of it. The following is an extract from his report, which, according to his usual perspicuous and comprehensive mode of reasoning, covers the whole ground of inquiry :

“ Whether it would be expedient to establish an additional national armory, will depend, in the first place, on the fact whether those already established are sufficient to fabricate as many arms as the necessity of the country requires; and if they are not sufficient, whether it would be more advisable to fabricate them by a national armory, or by contract.

“ In presenting this view of the subject, it is assumed that the supply of arms ought to be manufactured within the country, and ought not to be imported. By reference to the report of the Ordnance department, it will appear that the national armories can fabricate annually about 25,000 stand. This number, it is conceived, is not sufficient, whether we regard the present supply or the increased number which the growing population of the country requires. Our principal reliance for defence is upon the militia, a species of force which requires a much more ample supply than regular troops, as experience proves them to be much more wasteful of arms.

“ At the commencement of the late war, our supply amounted to 200,000 stand; and though it continued less than three years, our stock, at its termination, was nearly exhausted. It is believed that, as arms can be fabricated at *least* as cheap, and of better quality, by a national armory, than by contract, it is the preferable mode.

“ If these observations are correct, it would appear *expedient* to establish an additional national armory, and that the *place* of its location *ought* to be on the *western* waters. It is probable that arms can be fabricated in that portion of the country at least as cheap as at Harper’s Ferry or Springfield, and a very considerable expense would be annually saved in transportation.”

This extract affirms the following important propositions: *First*, that 25,000 stand of arms—the annual product of the national armories—was an insufficient supply for the country in 1818. *Second*, that a supply of 200,000 stand, on hand at the commencement of the last war, was nearly exhausted at its close. *Third*, that arms can be fabricated at least as cheap, and of better quality, by national armories, than by contract, and at least as cheap in the west as at Harper’s Ferry or Springfield.

Assuming, upon Mr. Calhoun’s high authority, that an annual supply of 25,000 stand of arms was insufficient in 1818, it follows, with absolute certainty, that it must be very largely deficient now. In 1818, our population was about 9,000,000; the number of the militia was 619,313, and the military establishment consisted of 7,270 officers and privates. Now our population is about 20,000,000; the number of the militia, according to the last imperfect returns, is 1,904,980; and it may be safely assumed that the permanent military establishment, after the present war, will consist at least of 15,000 officers and privates; whilst our borders have been greatly extended, by land and sea, thus calling for additional military posts, ordnance, and small-arms.

Comparing the average annual supply of arms from the national armories with the average annual increase of the militia for a period of six years, commencing with 1841, and ending with 1846, during which the national armories were much improved and enlarged, it appears that the proportion of supply and demand is as 15,235 is to 125,835. And to

this great deficiency should be added the increased demand caused by the consumption of the militia, the war, and the permanent increase of the military and naval establishment.

Much may be urged in favor of the superiority of the mode of fabricating ordnance and small-arms by national institutions. Indeed, it is not to be supposed that private contractors, who are too often influenced by their own interests, will or can bestow the same care and skill in so delicate and important a business as experienced and scientific officers, acting under a sense of public responsibility, and emulous to excel. In all the objects of perfection of model, perfection of mechanical execution, excellence of metal, &c., it may be safely assumed that national institutions are decidedly preferable. They are useful as a means of protecting the government against the extortion of private monopolies and combinations, to insure an ample and certain supply of ordnance and small-arms, and to facilitate the defence of our extended line of seacoast, by directing their capabilities to the production of boilers, engines, and other machinery suitable for war steamers in time of great public need.

Assuming from these considerations that another institution, combining the faculties both of an armory and foundry, is needed, it will scarcely be questioned that it should be located at some eligible point in the Mississippi valley. Such a location, especially upon the site of old Fort Massac, would be nearly central in regard to the territory, navigation, principal cities, and military posts of that extensive region. Heavy and diversified forests abound in that vicinity; the great Illinois coal-field, whose strata ranges from a few inches to ten feet deep, and whose area is about equal to that of all the coal-fields of England, passes within a few miles of the site, and easily and uninterruptedly communicates with it by safe and cheap navigation. Iron and lead ores abound in the same vicinity on both sides of the Ohio river, and are now being successfully mined and wrought within a few miles of the site. It would also be preferable for the facility and cheapness with which all the supplies of food, fuel, iron, and even lead, may be obtained for such an institution, and for the facility and cheapness with which ordnance and small-arms may be distributed throughout the Mississippi valley.

Had such an institution been thus located in 1818, it is quite probable that more than its cost would have been saved to the government in the item of transportation. It appears that the average expense of transporting muskets and rifles from the national armories to the depots in Louisville and Cincinnati is about fifty cents each. It also appears that the number of the militia of the States and Territories of the west and southwest, and of one third part of Pennsylvania, was, in 1844, 759,135; so that, if it remained to supply this portion of the militia with small arms from the national armories, it would cost the sum of \$379,567 50, which would be probably more than sufficient to establish the proposed institution.

Since the dates of the existing national armories, in 1794 and 1796, great and important changes have occurred in the country. The population of the Mississippi valley has increased, from about 500,000 to at least 10,000,000; States and Territories have been organized; and a community has grown up, active, various, and distinguished for its intelligence, patriotism and civilization. In the mean time, the commerce of that region has passed through the various stages of the bark canoe of the

Indian, the periaugna, the batteau, the keel boat, and the barge; until now it is carried on by 1,190 steamboats and 4,000 flat-boats, carrying an aggregate annual tonnage of 10,252,160 tons, and products for domestic and foreign consumption of the estimated value of \$432,651,240; being nearly double the amount of the whole foreign commerce of the United States.

These great and almost miraculous interests are now exposed to molestation and danger from several quarters. On the west, they are threatened by the numerous warlike bands of savages that infest that frontier, from the Rio Grande to our northern limits. On the northwest and northeast they are threatened by the proximity of the British Canadas, and British naval rivalry and ascendancy. But upon the south they are still more exposed. There, Great Britain is potentially posted in the very mouth of the Mississippi. There, in the very midst of the Mexican gulf, she possesses eighteen islands, and by the guns of her ships and her fortifications, darkens the great estuary of American commerce. Holding the key to the greatest avenue of our commerce, she might lock the door against its transit, by blockade, at will, and leave the products of our labors, from their very abundance, to rot upon our hands, or to convulse our business operations with the paroxysms of plethora. Or, by more active means, if she should prove as successful in a future war with us as she did in the last, penetrating the mouth of the Mississippi with a score of war steamers, she might strike down two-thirds of the commerce of the country in a day. Our whole navy anchored before the city of London, could scarcely inflict greater injury upon British commerce and property than her position in the gulf enables her to inflict upon ours.

To guard against the dangers to which we are thus exposed on different sides, something has already been done, but much more ought to be done. Along our western frontier and lake coast, military posts and fortifications have been established; and more recently, Congress has authorized the fortification of the Florida Reef, the Dry Tortugas, and Key West, in the Mexican gulf. But to give efficiency to these works, or completeness to any system of defences for the Mississippi valley, it is absolutely necessary, as a military depot, and as the very pivot and centre of the whole, that a national institution, endowed with large capacities for the fabrication of ordnance and small-arms, should be established in the valley.

Supposing our sea and lake coasts to be blockaded by a maritime power, as they were in the last war with England, it would be impossible to obtain supplies of ordnance and small-arms for the Mississippi valley from the foundries and armories of the east, otherwise than by transportation, with great cost and delay, and perhaps in inconsiderable quantities, across the Alleghany mountains. Such a reliance is certainly too precarious—it is unworthy of a great and free people.

As an evidence of the truth of these suggestions, the fact may be stated, that in 1803, when the Spanish intendant had refused to American traders the use of a commercial depot at New Orleans, in violation of the treaty of 1796, and when it was supposed that war would ensue as the consequence, Congress promptly appropriated more than a million and a half of dollars for the purpose of establishing arsenals upon the western waters, and of enabling the President to call into the public service 80,000 militia.

Under the constitution, the power “to declare war,” “to raise and support armies,” “to maintain a navy,” and “to provide for organizing, arm-

ing, and disciplining the militia," belongs to Congress; hence the correlative obligation rests upon them to furnish necessary arms and armaments for the public defence. This was one of the strongest inducements to the adoption of our federal institutions; and should they fail in fulfilling it, they would be responsible for any harm that might befall our citizens or the republic through so gross a neglect. Not only is Congress vested with the power to provide means necessary and proper for the public *security*; not only is the provident exercise of that power fairly deducible from the power itself; but such an exercise of it is unmistakably enjoined by the spirit, if not by the very terms, of the amendment to the constitution, which declares that "a well-regulated militia being necessary to the *security* of a free State, the right of the people to *keep* and *bear* arms shall not be infringed."

Perhaps from these considerations, in some degree, the measure recommended by Mr. Calhoun, in 1818, has been repeatedly urged upon the attention of Congress since. In 1823, President Monroe recommended the erection of a national armory upon the western waters, and in the same year an appropriation was granted by Congress to enable an examination to be made with a view to the object. In 1834, Colonel Richard M. Johnson, as chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the House, made an elaborate report in favor of the measure; and, in 1837, it was again cogently recommended by President Van Buren, and Mr. Poinsett, Secretary of War. In 1841, Congress granted another appropriation to enable the President to cause an examination to be made, and a site to be selected, for such an institution, which duty was performed by a competent board of military officers, who, after visiting forty-eight or more sites, reported in favor of locating the proposed institution at old Fort Massac, which is near the confluence of the Cumberland, Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers.

In 1844, Colonel John J. Hardin reported, from the Committee on Military Affairs of the House, in favor of the measure, and of this site; and, at the same session, upon my motion, an appropriation of \$20,000 passed the House, to commence the necessary works. A similar report was made by Colonel Archibald Yell in 1846. And does it not argue strongly in favor of the measure, that such men as Johnson, Hardin, and Yell should have united in recommending it?—men who have proved their patriotism by offering up their blood or their lives upon crimsoned but victorious battle-fields. The people, in primary assemblies, and the legislatures of States, for a number of years past, have also called for the measure; and may I not now, in the eloquent language of Colonel Johnson, repeat, "that magnanimity, liberality, and patriotism, all combine to induce" Congress "to discard all local attachments and preferences, for the purpose of securing for our country this important institution?"

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN A. McCLERNAND.

To the Hon. WILLIAM A. RICHARDSON,
Member of the Committee on Military Affairs.

The committee, therefore, adopting these views, report back the accompanying bill.