

The Formation of Camp Benning

In the first 100 years of the City of Columbus, the foundations of a union between the City and military encampments were laid. Early years saw conflict with the Creek Indians, the native inhabitants of the land that Columbus and Fort Benning now rest upon, and led to the establishment of Fort Mitchell. Later, as the Spanish-American War arose, a brigade of troops was established next to Columbus at Camp Conrad and consequently demonstrated to the citizens of Columbus the lucrative benefits of having so many soldiers nearby.

The excitement of World War I in 1917 was strong in Columbus, as it was elsewhere in the United States, and served to build upon the previously laid foundation of a strong desire by Columbus citizens to establish an Army post in Columbus. With senior members of the community holding recent memories of Camp Conrad and the subsequent wealth that was brought by such a large military body stationed in close proximity to the city, the drive to have a military training camp established in Columbus was at an all-time high.

On April 4, 1917, the day after President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Germany, the Columbus Enquirer-Sun printed a story regarding the local Chamber of Commerce's desire to have an Army camp set up near Columbus with at least a brigade of troops.

After the formal Declaration of War by Congress on April 6, 1917, the push to have the camp established in Columbus was emboldened. Congress passed the Selective Service Act on April 28, 1917, and by June, all men between the ages of 21 and 31 were registered and the first were being called to duty to begin their training.

Originally, an Encampment Committee of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce voyaged to Washington, D.C., to promote Columbus as a site for one of the new camps, but were met with little success. Several members of the committee remained in the nation's Capital to speak with War Department officials and members of Congress until February, 1918 when they returned home, saddened by what seemed to be futile efforts.

Unbeknownst to them, on October 21, 1917, Gen. John J. Pershing, Commander of the American Expeditionary Force in France, sent a cablegram to the War Department asking for better trained soldiers. Due to the reports from other high-ranking field officers and the high numbers of battlefield casualties, the War Department decided to create a Special Board to select a site to train soldiers on infantry skills and tactics. This board was headed by Col. Henry E. Eames, Commander of the School of Musketry at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Columbus was selected as one of four prospective sites, largely due to the hard efforts of the Chamber's Encampment Committee.

When Chamber of Commerce officials learned that the school would be created, a full-time representative was sent to Washington, D.C., to promote Columbus' cause. He telegraphed home on August 17, 1918, that the General Staff of the U.S. Army had approved the recommendation of the investigating board and that the Infantry School of Arms be located near Columbus.

Major J. Paul Jones was assigned as construction quartermaster for the project. Although no funds had yet been allocated and nothing had been formally approved by the Secretary of War, Jones received word on September 20, 1918 that the Infantry School staff and troops from Fort Sill were enroute and would arrive on October 1, 1918.

With great haste, and with the willing help of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce, Maj. Jones and Col. Eames began looking for a site for the coming camp. An 84-acre farm belonging to Alex Reid on Macon Road was selected due to its close proximity to downtown Columbus, city water supply and the streetcar service.

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Though no money had been appropriated, it would take \$100,000 to build the temporary mess halls, tent frames, bath houses and water supply installations needed to form the infrastructure of the camp. Jones' set to work and his acquisition of construction supplies and lumber proved pivotal. Local civilians were so eager to have the post located in Columbus they contributed the supplies without payment first, as they were willing to wait for payment until proper authorization could be handled.

A total of 400,000 feet of lumber was hauled to the camp site on Macon Road, and 300 tent frames, mess halls and warehouses were completed in seven days.

The first detachment arrived on October 7, 1918 and on October 19, the new facility was formally christened Camp Benning. Soon after, it became clear that the post's current location was not large enough for suitable terrain for rifle ranges.

The new site chosen for Camp Benning was a 1,800 acre plantation owned by Arthur Bussey eight miles to the south. The Bussey Plantation, along with numerous buildings to include the plantation house known as Riverside, and an additional 115,000 acres was purchased for \$3,600,000 on October 19, 1918. Construction of new facilities and infrastructure began immediately and an additional \$9,119,875 was approved by the Secretary of War to fund the establishment of an Infantry School of Arms for 25,000 men. This appeared to confirm the permanence of the camp, however, on November 11, 1918, the Great War came to an end. On January 7, 1919, an order from the War Department halted funds and directed the abandonment of all new construction and lease options, cancellation of all condemnation proceedings and salvaging of all work already done.

The Columbus Chamber of Commerce representative immediately returned to Washington, D.C., to organize a campaign to present Columbus' case before the Senate Committee on Military Affairs. In addition, Chamber members visited the new camp commander and asked Col Paul B. Malone to delay the dismantling of buildings until they had time to settle things in Washington. He agreed to work on the salvage portion of his duties and Maj. Jones interpreted the word "salvage" to mean "save," and thus had all of the buildings repainted.

Over the next three months, Columbus citizens and military leaders lobbied the Senate Committee stating that Benning was a worthwhile endeavor. Many infantry officers would go before the Committee to petition the necessity of the Infantry School to ensure better training for soldiers. In their experience, they felt that had soldiers received better training, the loss of life in the Great War would not have been so severe.

In early 1920, a bill to establish a permanent Infantry School at the new camp in Georgia was defeated by a vote of eight to six.

Several other Chamber members joined their colleague and Army officers in the Capitol and had the matter reopened. The second vote that finally established Camp Benning on a permanent basis was cast on March 8, 1919 and stood at seven to six in favor of the Post.

As the camp grew rapidly in the 1920s, technology and weapons also advanced. The tank arrived to Camp Benning as part of the infantry and thus gave birth to mounted armored maneuver. Lessons learned from World War I caused advancements in infantry tactics and techniques. Meanwhile the infrastructure blossomed and Camp Benning received its first Presidential visit on October 27, 1921 by President Warren G. Harding. Several months later on January 9, 1922, the War Department issued General Order No. 1 making Camp Benning a permanent military installation. On February 8, 1922, Camp Benning was re-designated Fort Benning, and the rapid development of the Post ensued.