

Fort Oglethorpe History

In 1946, after the end of World War II, the War Department determined that the army facility known as Fort Oglethorpe had become surplus property and instructed the War Assets Administration to sell the land and structures to the public. With a vision for the future, local residents applied to the state of Georgia for incorporation. In 1949, the city of Fort Oglethorpe was established, the first city to be formed in Georgia in 25 years. The city is located just north of the Chickamauga National Military Park, site of the Battle of Chickamauga, September 19-20, 1863, the bloodiest two-day battle of the Civil War.

In 1895 Congress established the Chickamauga National Military Park to preserve the land and honor those who had fought and died there. Anticipating military needs to house thousands for training, Congress legislated in May 1896 that the army could use all military parks with their vast acreage as training grounds. In 1898 Camp Thomas, named for General George H. Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga," was created to meet the needs of the Spanish-American War. Over 7,000 regular army infantry, cavalry and artillery units were stationed here from April 14 to May 14 and then embarked for service in Cuba via the Western and Atlantic and the Chattanooga, Rome and Southern railroads. The next day, over 58,000 men and 10,000-15,000 horses of the First, Third and 6th Volunteer Corps arrived. The Park provided the space, available water, railroads, climate and terrain to house the men and horses, to acclimate them to the hot climate they would meet in the Caribbean and to practice on terrain both hilly (Snodgrass Hill area) and flat (Brock Field area). The volunteers then shipped out to Puerto Rico. Camp Thomas began closing in August 1898 and it took years for the battlefield to recover. In the wake of the war, the Army concluded that permanent posts were necessary.

In 1902, 810 acres were secured just north of the Military Park and construction was begun on Chickamauga Park (North Post). It included officers' quarters, barracks and stables, parade grounds, hospital and support buildings. The architecture reflected the Classical Renaissance Revival style featured at the Columbia Exposition of 1892 and is best expressed in the officers' quarters on Barnhardt Circle. President Theodore Roosevelt visited the cavalry post in 1903 while it was under construction.

The post was dedicated December 27, 1904 and named "Fort Oglethorpe" for the founder of the Georgia colony, James Oglethorpe. It was used as camp of instruction and maneuvers for regular army and national guard troops in 1906, 1908 and 1910.

It served as the home of the 3rd, 7th, 10, 11th and 12th Cavalry prior to World War I. During World War I, Fort Oglethorpe became the site of three camps that extended onto battlefield land to the south of the post. Wooden barracks were erected among the monuments honoring Union and Confederate units from the Civil War and trench and war games were conducted there. A young John J. Pershing served here for a short time and First Lieutenant Dwight David Eisenhower served nearly three months in late 1917 as an instructor in trench warfare. The medical and sanitary corps were located at Camp Greenleaf where horse-drawn ambulances were trained, a crash training program for officers was conducted at Camp McLean and infantry and engineers were trained at Camp Nathan B. Forrest.

The War Department designated Fort Oglethorpe as one of three camps to house German prisoners of war and "enemy aliens," Germans living in the United States. Among those detained at the Post were members of three German merchantmen crews, spies and diplomats.

When the War ended, most of the 1,600 temporary buildings constructed on the Battlefield were removed. Among the troops demobilized through the Post was Sergeant Alvin York from neighboring Pall Mall, Tennessee.

The 6th Cavalry had been established in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln and was stationed near Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. The 6th served on the Texas border during the Indian wars,

in Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and the pursuit of Pancho Villa in 1914.

On July 4, 1919, the 6th Cavalry was permanently assigned to Fort Oglethorpe and the Post took on a more relaxed atmosphere. The beauty of the officers' quarters, the proximity of the camp to the city of Chattanooga and the recreational activities held at the post made Fort Oglethorpe one of the premier assignments between the wars. Polo matches, parades, troop reviews, concerts and the officers' club dances attracted local citizens and provided numerous opportunities for interaction between the military and civilian populations.

Between the wars, the post facilities were used by ROTC trainees, reserve officers, the Citizens Military Training Camp. In 1933 the headquarters of Citizen Conservation Corps District C was established at the Post. District C included 54 camps in the Tennessee Valley area. Veterans of the CCC continue to hold reunions in Fort Oglethorpe.

After Pearl Harbor, Fort Oglethorpe was quickly transformed into an induction center for new recruits, some of which were CCC members. Barracks and training facilities again used the Battlefield. A Provost Marshall's school was established and then, later, the Third Army Women's Army Corps was located in the area known as the "South Post."

By 1941, the 6th Cavalry had changed from horse to mechanized vehicles. Parts of the battlefield were used as experimental proving grounds for tanks and other weapon systems. The "bantam cars" (Jeeps) were tested here in Chickamauga Creek and in area lakes.

In 1942, the 6th Cavalry was transferred to South Carolina, taking with it 500 vehicles and no horses. The post then housed WAACs/WACs and, again, prison barracks for enemy aliens, including members of Rommel's Afrika Korps. Of note, those prisoners and detainees who died while being held at Fort Oglethorpe during both wars are buried in the National Cemetery in Chattanooga in a designated area.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the Post April 7, 1943 and reviewed the WACs on the parade grounds at Barnhardt Circle. By September 1943, all men had been transferred from the Post and 1,000 women a week participated in a basic four-week training course. Upon completion, the WACs took over administrative work in the military, thereby releasing men to fight. The WACs were at Fort Oglethorpe until July 1945. With the ending of the war, the post became a redistribution center as servicemen returned from military service and were discharged to civilian life.

By 1946 the Army had determined the post could not be enlarged for future use and the property was declared surplus. The land and structures were sold to the public. Of prominence today, the Post hospital continues as part of the Hutcheson Medical Center, the officers' quarters around Barnhardt Circle are now private homes and several post buildings have been converted to new uses. The post gymnasium is now a restaurant and antique shop, the PX is now an antique store, one stable houses a gift shop and one of the officers' houses is a bed-and-breakfast. The brick houses near the hospital, known as Sergeants Row, serve several auxiliary departments of the hospital. At the entrance to the parade grounds and Barnhardt Circle, the Post chapel is on the left and the Post theater on the right. The original flag pole and the original Post bandstand can also be seen.

A group of local citizens organized and petitioned for the creation of a town to be called "Fort Oglethorpe" that generally incorporated the boundaries of the old post, and in 1949 Georgia founded its first town in 25 years. With the built town in place, the city council concentrated on establishing an elementary school and assuring the utilities would keep abreast with the anticipated population growth. Annexation of land and development of major streets and thoroughfares have fostered the growth of the town.

The old parade ground was purchased by the city with the stipulation that 9 acres would be used for a school and the remainder to be used as a public park. The area now contains the original bandstand, the former Fort Oglethorpe elementary school, the former Fort Oglethorpe library, the 6th

Cavalry museum, and numerous baseball fields. The city has recently purchased land to relocate the baseball fields out of the downtown area, restoring more of the parade grounds.

The widening of U.S. 27 in the old downtown section of the town linked local traffic from Lafayette to the south and Chattanooga to the north. The creation of Battlefield Parkway, Georgia 2A, connected Fort Oglethorpe to the county seat of Ringgold and to Interstate 75. This increased traffic benefited the town.

In 1977, interested citizens worked with the city government to create an Historical Preservation Commission. One of its first projects was the establishment of an Historic District which included numerous buildings from the Post period that have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The National Park Service worked with interested citizens and elected officials to develop a bypass around the Battlefield. The 27 Bypass, opened in 1998, relieved the Battlefield of commercial traffic and has returned the Park one step closer to its original purpose as an area of sacred grounds.

Fort Oglethorpe continues to experience population growth and land annexation. New schools, streetscaping, downtown development and continued reuse of older buildings set the scene for the future of this historic town.

~Compiled by Gerry Depken