

## Ft. Dearborn Island Armory

A presentation by Scott Coleman on the history of the Dearborn Island Armory, a site chosen by President George Washington, will be held on Thursday, March 19 at 7:00 p.m. at the historic Fairfield County Museum, hosted by the Fairfield County Genealogy Society.

Near Lancaster is an extraordinary military site that was chosen personally by President George Washington, implemented by President Thomas Jefferson, purchased by Brigadier General and Senator Thomas Sumter, and partly designed by Eli Whitney and a Hessian who was state engineer of South Carolina! How did this group of prominent people become associated with an island in the Catawba River?

President George Washington selected Mount Dearborn, an island in the Catawba River at Great Falls, as one of three regional armories to manufacture weapons to defend the new United States of America by arming its militias. The new nation faced many threats, and as the republic planned its defense in the 1790s, this site was planned to store ammunition and make weapons for the South.

According to the South Carolina Department of Archives and History Historic Properties Record, Mount Dearborn was constructed and occupied from 1803 to about 1817. It was intended to be one of three regional armories to have a central system of arms production. The first two were at Springfield, Massachusetts and Harpers Ferry, Virginia. In 1798, George Washington directed a third armory be constructed in the Southern states, and suggested a location in Chester District, South Carolina, near the town of Rocky Mount, just below the Great Falls of the Catawba River. In 1802, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, acting on instructions from President Thomas Jefferson, asked Senator Thomas Sumter of South Carolina, former Revolutionary War Brigadier General, to purchase land for the U.S. government at the location Washington had suggested. The site was named for him.

Secretary Dearborn employed Eli Whitney, credited inventor of the cotton gin, to consult with the state engineer, Christian Senf, a Hessian who fought under General Nathaniel Greene in the Revolutionary War, on the best location to build on the new federal land. Part of the plan included the construction of a canal that would be a source of waterpower. Legal disputes with the Catawba Navigation Company prevented the completion of the waterway. By early 1804 construction began on the magazine and arsenal, but the armory was never constructed. While the armory was never built, the facility was used as an arsenal to store weapons and as a military post to house and train troops. Mount Dearborn saw its greatest activity during the War of 1812 when new recruits were sent to the post to train and protect the area. Military activity at Mount Dearborn stopped by 1817, and the U.S. government transferred the land back to the State of South Carolina in 1829. A 2004 archaeological survey identified ten building foundations at the site.

By 1807 the army refocused its defensive priorities on Charleston, and construction at Dearborn slowed. Despite the delays, by 1809 the main buildings were largely completed while construction continued on the barracks and other structures. At this time Mount Dearborn became a recruiting center for one of the nation's new regiments, as the United States prepared for a possible war with Britain. Not long after its formation, most of the unit was transferred to bolster Charleston's defenses. A small detachment of soldiers remained as caretakers. For a brief period in early 1816, Congress proposed Mount Dearborn as the site for one of three regional military academies. Eventually lawmakers decided just to provide more funds to West Point in New York. By 1825 the site was reported abandoned, and the land officially returned to the state four years later.



Officer's quarters at Dearborn Island Armory might have looked like this drawing, if completed; by local artist Susan Kelsey.