

WHERE IS SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS?

Springfield, Massachusetts is located in the southern part of Western Massachusetts near the Connecticut border. It is bordered by Agawam and West Springfield on the west, Chicopee and Ludlow on the north, Wilbraham on the east, and Longmeadow and East Longmeadow on the south. Springfield is 89 miles southwest of Boston; 25 miles from Hartford, Connecticut; and 134 miles north of New York City. Springfield was named for Springfield, England, and is known as the birthplace of basketball. The population is 156,983.

HISTORIES OF THE TOWNS OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Heritage Surveys, Inc. (Land Surveying and Civil Engineering) is building a compilation of historical pictures and sketches of the towns of Western Massachusetts from its archives of ephemera and books. This is a work in progress.



Springfield, Massachusetts – 1879

History Of the First United States Federal Armory, 1794

At the outbreak of the American Revolution the colonies possessed almost no capacity to manufacture small arms suitable for military use (muskets). As was the case with virtually all manufactured goods, especially those requiring either high levels of artisan skills or large volume production, the colonies depended exclusively on imports from Britain.

Think about it: That situation that quickly led to a crisis situation for the army during the American Revolution, especially once Baron von Steuben began training George Washington's Continental Army in European military tactics.

Despite the efforts of several state governments to organize armories, the situation remained desperate until the Continental Congress managed to arrange the purchase of muskets from France. The delivery of 80,000 French Charleville muskets to the Continental Army did much more than eliminate the immediate arms shortage in General Washington's army. When the fighting finally ended in 1781, the young American republic found itself in possession of a huge stockpile of surplus muskets -- more than enough to meet the army's needs well into the 1790s.

The fact that the American arsenals of the 1780s were fairly bursting with Charleville muskets produced two consequences that rippled down through the 1790s and beyond. The first effect of the surplus was simply that the Charleville, virtually identical to the British "Brown Bess," established itself as the standard infantry weapon for the American military. It remained the standard musket until 1814, and until that time the Charleville was the musket the military specified in purchasing contracts - including the contract for the 10,000 ordered from Eli Whitney in 1798.

The second impact of the musket surplus also affected Eli Whitney's fortunes. The military was the only possible market for high volume production of small arms. In a pre-industrial economy populated by 4-5 million people, the needs of hunters, frontiersmen, and local militias could be met most efficiently by local artisans and imports. As long as the military surplus lasted, economic logic dictated the market for small arms remain too small to support development of a significant arms industry in America. Indeed, even in the absence of the surplus muskets, purchases from foreign suppliers was still the cheapest way to procure muskets. Economic logic simply called for importing. Through the 1790s, economic logic said that the best way for the American government to procure muskets was to buy them from established armories in France or England.

In the arms industry, however, political logic can override economic logic. That happened in the early 1790s when the political situation in Europe led the Congress to see a threat in the lack of an American small arms industry. The conflicts boiling over from the French Revolution promised to shut off seagoing trade, quite possibly leaving the army vulnerable to another shortage of muskets if the U.S. were drawn into any conflict that called for mobilization. Thus, in 1794, Congress authorized the opening of a federal armory in Springfield, Massachusetts. This new arsenal, with 70 workmen and 30 apprentices, was expected to produce 4,200 muskets annually. The Springfield Armory began meeting its quota in 1799, just as Whitney was getting started on his production.

Springfield, was chosen as the site for the first government armory in 1794 for political and strategic reasons rather than for its economic feasibility. Strategic thinking led the planners to bypass the economically more logical choice of Eastern Pennsylvania. That area, which contained the young republic's largest concentration of gunsmiths, was considered too vulnerable to occupation by an invading European power. Springfield, Massachusetts, on the other hand, was thought sufficiently far inland and remote to furnish a measure of protection. Sited on the frontier for defensive purposes, it took the Springfield Armory several years to begin meeting its annual quota of 4,200 muskets, but by 1800 production was in full swing.

Annual Production of Muskets - Springfield Armory

1795 - 245

1796 - 838

1797 - 1,028

1798 - 1,044

1799 - 4,595

1800 - 4,862