

12-21-1990

Exerpts from Historic Huntsville: A City of New Beginnings

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Recommended Citation

Stephens, Elise Hopkins (1990) "Exerpts from Historic Huntsville: A City of New Beginnings," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 17: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol17/iss1/9>

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Excerpts from — Historic Huntsville: A City of New Beginnings

(Windsor Publications, Inc., 1984)

Elise Hopkins Stephens

Red fire trucks clanged their bells with abandon as they twisted through the neighborhood streets flooding the city with Huntsville *Times* extras. The headlines blared out the tidings: "Huntsville Gets Chemical War Plant: Cost Over \$40,000,000." The date was Thursday, July 3, 1941. By Monday, July 7, over 500 men had applied for site preparation and construction jobs.

The next six months of 1941 were momentous. The chemical warfare plant quickly augmented by an ammunition arsenal awaited men, muscle, and machines. There were jobs aplenty.

The 40,000 acres that changed the course of Huntsville's history at the time the government announced its plans in 1941 were owned by a cross-section of the community. Some of the larger spreads were rented; other plots were worked on shares. But, there were many smaller cuts of land that had been in families for years, belonged to church congregations, or had been used for schoolhouses and playgrounds.

Former owners who were interviewed later remembered the hasty transactions attending government land purchases. Within six months, families were to harvest their fall crop and find a new place to live. Hugh B. Gillespie, Jr., in charge of land procurement, faced multiple problems. Many tracts had no clear title. Some families could not be found to negotiate with at all. Many others had nowhere to move and little means for removal. The Alabama Relocation Corporation was organized to assist them.

To help ease the housing shortage, the government brought in trailers and established trailer parks. Some arsenal employees had worked on construction jobs in other parts of the country and had grown adept at building instant communities in their trailer parks. Two of the parks, one on Holmes and another in the west Merrimack area, filled rapidly. A trailer was even set aside for a library. The "trailer wives," as they called themselves, were among the first to volunteer for Red Cross work and then, when war was declared, to urge that women go to work to free the men for fighting. One trailer wife turned her home over for use as a day-care center for children.

Once war was declared by Congress, working men and women at the arsenal became soldiers in overalls, some even offering the government one workday free a week. Textile workers and management also came together in order to fulfill wartime orders. Unionization took a back seat to defense of the nation. Construction at the arsenal was a top national priority, but civilian housing construction was also ticketed by the federal government for priority in Madison and Limestone counties for houses costing \$6,000 or less.

The war years were busy, prosperous one for the area. By 1942, 15,000 people were gainfully employed in the country. By May 1944 manufacturing employment in Huntsville alone had risen to 17,000 and total jobs in the city had reached 30,000. A 1943 count of the mill villages and unincorporated areas put that population at 40,354. In 1945 Huntsville's three mills employed a total of 2,775 with 725 at Dallas, 850 at Merrimack, and 1,200 at Lincoln.

The main business of the area was the arsenal complex. Land and construction costs at Huntsville Arsenal and the Gulf Chemical Warfare Depot built on the Tennessee River totaled \$70,000,000. The Redstone Arsenal's construction costs amounted to \$11,500,000. At their peaks, the Huntsville Arsenal employed 6,707 civilians and the Redstone Arsenal 4,500.