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When Uncle Sam Called: The Creation of Redstone Arsenal

Elise H. Stephens

Few other cities can make the claim about their military installation that is heard here: Redstone Arsenal is incontestably the best thing that ever happened to Huntsville, Alabama. From humble beginnings in corn field and cow pasture, its future will soon be crowned by a major new role as MACOM and a magnificent new building — The Sparkman Center — will bear the name of the man many say “almost single-handedly” brought the Arsenal to Huntsville.

My topic for today is “When Uncle Sam Called: The Creation of Redstone Arsenal.” As with other acts of creation, certain “creation myths” have gained currency over the years. Bob Ward in last year’s wonderful *Times* tribute commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Arsenal, quoted the plaudits as saying “In the beginning ... there was John Sparkman.”

Redstone Arsenal is the generic name for three separate entities which originally shared the nearly 40,000 acres purchased from 320 landowners in the fall of 1941. Displaced from this land were 550 families, 76% of whom were blacks. First came the chemical War Plant which became the Huntsville Arsenal. 7,700 acres were set aside for the Gulf Chemical Warfare Depot. A 4,000-acre tract, the Redstone Ordnance Plant, was later elevated to arsenal status in February 26, 1943. The two arsenals and depot coordinated to deliver Uncle Sam’s powerful punch in WWII. Not until well after the war when then Colonel H. N. Toftoy had secured Redstone Arsenal for the United States Ordnance Guided Missile Center did the army in the summer of 1949, consolidate most of the deactivated Huntsville Arsenal with Redstone and make them one, preparatory of the arrival of 130 German scientists from Fort Bliss.

For the purposes of history and for today, the Redstone Arsenal traces its origins back to that thrilling and memorable July 3rd day when fire engines clanked and honked their way through the city's streets tossing out *Huntsville Times Extras* which headlined the good news. HUNTSVILLE GETS CHEMICAL WAR PLANT, COST OVER \$40,000,000. A front page picture of John Sparkman accompanies the lead article. Its caption reads: "DISTRICT GETS PLUM — Rep. John Sparkman, above, played a major role in the selection of Huntsville as the site for the new chemical warfare plant. Rep(resentative). Sparkman and Senator Lister Hill have been working untiringly since early June to land the plant."

Lister Hill's biographer, Virginia VanderVeer Hamilton, says Hill "induced the Army Chemical Warfare Service to locate a plant at Huntsville to take advantage of cheap electricity to produce gas." (p. 97)

If Hill "induced" the birth of the Arsenal, exactly what was the role of John Sparkman, the Chamber of Commerce, and other individuals? John Sparkman's papers are housed in the W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library at The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. It is to them as well as to the newspapers and interviews that I have gone to piece together for my own satisfaction (and I hope your interest) the course of events and actions that culminated in the creation of the Arsenal.

A native of Hartselle, Alabama, Sparkman rose from humble beginnings to become Adelai Stevenson's running mate in 1952. He attended the University of Alabama, taking three degrees, BA, MA, and law. Politics came easy to this young man who edited (*The Crimson and White*) and served as Student Government President. Coming to Huntsville in 1925, Sparkman taught school in the mornings and practiced law in the afternoons until established in his profession. It wasn't long before Huntsville became Sparkman's oyster. Active in most things civic, he gained a reputation for effective leadership.

In 1936, in the midst of the Depression when Roosevelt's New Deal was sputtering, and the TVA was under attack, John Sparkman won election to the Congressional seat from the Eight District. In Congress he came to the attention of Representative Lister Hill.

The Montgomery Democrat had sponsored enabling legislation for TVA, joining with Senator Norris in 1933 to create the Tennessee Valley Authority. This agency was overseen by the House Military Affairs Committee on which Hill served for fourteen years, many as the ranking Democrat and from 1937 to 1938 as Chairman. When he went to the Senate in 1938, Hill and House Speaker John Bankhead worked to get Sparkman appointed to Hill's old seat on the Military Affairs Committee.

In the days before the Arsenal was announced, John Sparkman must have thought of his seat on that all important committee as a hot seat, as his constituents kept trying to light a fire under him.

On February 22, 1939, John Sparkman put a bill into the legislative hopper. It became HR4408. "A bill to authorize a survey for the establishment of a chemical warfare unit in the Tennessee Valley in north Alabama." Like all such bills, HR4408 was referred to Sparkman's Committee on Military Affairs.

Important connections were made. Sparkman met Walter C. Baker, then Major General and Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service, who escorted him and his colleagues through Maryland's aging Edgewood Arsenal in May of 1939. Baker later wrote Sparkman hoping he had given the Representative "an intimate grasp of the affairs of this service" and assuring him "I am available at anytime."

Sparkman later admitted that Major General Baker, in 1939, came to Huntsville under cover simply as "Mr. Baker" and surveyed the city and environs, unbeknownst to anybody except Sparkman, Lister Hill and the TVA.

Thus was set into motion a proposal that would culminate in the creation of the Redstone Arsenal. From bill to building, the route was circuitous, filled with detours, deadends and much hometown grumbling.

The Chamber of Commerce watched as war clouds gathered and Uncle Sam began to spend millions of dollars on defense industries. All around them it seemed, towns were landing defense plants, aviation schools, chemical or munitions industries. When an ordnance plant was announced for Gadsden, Chamber of Commerce Secretary Jack M. Nelson, wrote Sparkman, July 5, 1939, in urgent tones: "This story has certainly started everyone in this town after you and me. They seem to think we have gone to sleep on the job."

Further, Nelson wrote: I am advised, pretty reliably from Washington that the War Department is planning for both munitions plants, depots, and aviation posts in the South. We feel that Huntsville should be given consideration on these and that something should be done. ... and that you, as a member of the Military Affairs Committee, could investigate and allow us an opportunity to present Huntsville's claims in this connection. I am having this thrown at me on all sides and so is President George Mahoney. ..."

In January, 1941, he expressed the same conviction to Claude Pipes, the new Chamber Secretary:

"The way I see it, there is no need for us to butt our heads uselessly against a stonewall. Huntsville is simply not properly located for such a plant, for instance, as went to Gadsden, or to Childersburg, or to Talladega. We are properly located for aviation, both manufacturing and training."

Sparkman zapped a letter back dated July 7, 1939, expressing a view he was to hold firmly until 1941:

"General Wesson has told me that it would be foolish to build a munitions plant outside of an iron and steel

area — and that ... any such plant would almost have to be located in the Birmingham - Anniston - Gadsden area.”

With heavy defense plants out of the question, Sparkman encouraged his constituents to look to the air for Huntsville's future.

The need for a respectable airport was given dramatic punch when, on the evening of March 15, 1938, eighteen army planes radioed that they needed to land in Huntsville enroute to their destination. Citizens were frantically called upon to hasten to the airfield in their automobiles so that their headlights could serve as beacon lights to guide the pilots as they landed.

From 1939 until May 26, 1941, he championed an airport, an air school, the encouragement of airplane manufacture and the idea of Huntsville as a “hub”, probably before the concept had originated.



Tremendous local energy went into the creation of the airport off Whitesburg Pike on a 720 acre stretch of the old Garth farm called the Sibley farm. Carl T. Jones of G. W. Jones & Sons was the engineer who laid out three landing strips. A fourth was to be added later. To finance construction, city and county leaders looked to Washington and John Sparkman.

A barrage of telegrams apprised Sparkman. Major McAllister wired:

It's up to you now to secure approval of War Department WPA Application for National Defense Airport Project for Huntsville ... nothing short of its approval will be tolerated.

County Commission Chairman, Joe Van Valkenburgh wired:

... Huntsville has asked little of you, but this time everyone is expecting results.

Sparkman gave them results. On August 12, 1940 he wired the good news to Robert K. (Buster) Bell, then President of the Chamber of Commerce. But the good news soon soured. Hopes that the airport could be a nucleus of a major flight school were smashed.

In a four-page letter dated 26 May, 1941, Commanding Brigadier General W. R. Weaver wrote to Sparkman that the Huntsville airport site was too cramped, "approached at a slope of 30 to 1," instead of the Air Corps requirement of 40 to 1. Student flyers had to be able to take off and land into the wind, which could not be done with the present topography of the three runways. There had to be four runways and only three had been built. They weren't all long enough. And, furthermore, these could only be used for non-military use; yet the mayor and county commission had stipulated that they wished to reserve the right for its use "in the event we can secure the routing of a commercial airline."

The fallout from this rejection of everyone's fondest hopes could have led to some bitter acrimony and finger pointing had not the arsenal been waiting to be born. I am reminded of a sign behind my desk at school: "When My Ship Came In, I Was At The Airport." When Huntsville's ship finally came in, John Sparkman and most Huntsvillians were still at the airport!

On April 9, 1941, President Roosevelt met with the governors of six southern states, among them Alabama's Frank M. Dixon, Chairman of the Southern Governor's Conference. They were advised that 18 new plants would be located in the South and West, among them would be ordnance and chemical units. The governors urged "decentralization of defense industries" and Roosevelt listened. Within a week, Sparkman wrote Claude Pipes alerting him to "a new procedure" for plant site selection. A Plant Site Committee located in Washington would give "full and sympathetic consideration ... to any proposal setting out the availability of particular sites." The controlling factors would be "availability of labor, necessary supplies, housing, strategic geographical locations, and such other factors as may relate to the particular class of defense project."

Sparkman suggested that the Chamber send the Committee Chairman any map or plat showing available sites, setting forth their advantages.

On April 24, 1941, Sparkman wrote Pipes, "I have obtained from the War Department a memorandum setting out requirements for new munitions plants ... I am enclosing a copy."

Huntsville was getting closer and closer to pay dirt. Within a fortnight of the airport rejection letter, while still smarting from that blow, Sparkman received a curious letter from Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr., who had all along been busily at work with George Mahoney and others pushing for Huntsville. It was dated June 9, 1941.

Right: Lawrence
Goldsmith, Sr.



Below:
George Mahoney



Footnotes to History

AIR MAIL

June 9, 1941

Hon. John Sparkman,
House of Representatives,
Washington, D.C.

My dear John:-

On yesterday, Mr. Senter, connected with the N.C. & St.L. Railroad phoned George Mahoney that he had two men flying down from Baltimore Sunday afternoon, who would be in Huntsville Sunday night, and these gentlemen were interested in looking over Madison County in the area south of the airport, and as far south as the Tennessee River, an area of approximately 7 square miles.

This morning George and myself took these gentlemen and covered the entire area from Huntsville south to the Tennessee River; Whitesburg Pike on the east, and Triana and Madison on the west. They had maps and knew exactly what they wanted to see.

Their names were Lt. Col. Charles Ernest Loucks, located in the War Department, Annex #1, Washington, and the other was Mr. R. F. Graef, connected with the engineering firm of Whitman, Requardt, & Smith, 1304 St. Paul Street, Baltimore. They did not tell us very much except that they wanted about 1500 acres for a building site, and that the entire project would require 30,000 acres in all. They had looked at several sites, one in West Tennessee, others I do not know where.

They were not inclined to talk very much, but knew exactly what they wanted, and where they wanted to go. They were very much impressed and liked the area that we showed them

very much. What firm they were representing, or who they were representing, I could not get the information from them.

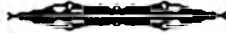
I am writing you this for what it is worth. Perhaps you can enlighten me on the subject. They were especially interested in keeping the matter as quiet as possible. Get what information you can and write me. Thanks.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Lawrence

Lawrence Goldsmith



COPY OF WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Washington, D. C.
June 11, 1941

Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith
Huntsville, Alabama

Have discussed matter fully with Colonel Loucks, also with Senator Hill. Five sites, all told, are under consideration. Engineers report will be made soon based on which final selection will be made. Am keeping in close touch with situation urging strongly favorable action on Huntsville site. Senator Hill promises full co-operation.

John Sparkman, M. C.



COPY OF WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Washington, D. C.
June 12, 1941

Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith
Huntsville, Alabama

Forced to cancel telephone call due to another engagement.
When convenient tomorrow call me. Suggest you have stenographer available to take notes.

John Sparkman, M. C.



AIR MAIL

June 12, 1941

Hon. John Sparkman,
House of Representatives,
Washington, D. C.

My dear John:-

Thanks for your telegram. I certainly hope that we can get favorable action on the Huntsville site.

I also phoned Senator Hill on yesterday, and he promised to do everything possible in the matter.

Huntsville is counting on you. This is our only chance.

Many thanks.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Lawrence

Lawrence Goldsmith



COPY OF WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Washington, D. C.
June 14, 1941

Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith
Huntsville, Alabama

Confirming telephone conversation yesterday Major General Porter and Colonel English leaving Washington this afternoon will reach Huntsville eleven tomorrow morning. Will be on Memphis Pullman. Meet them at station and have reservations at Russell Erskine Hotel. Have informed them you would and that you would be completely at their disposal. Have assured them of every cooperation by people and officials of Huntsville and Madison County.

John Sparkman, M. C.



(excerpts only)

June 14, 1941

Mr. Reese T. Amis
Huntsville, Alabama

Dear Reese:

... As soon as Lawrence Goldsmith told me what had happened, I got in touch with the War Department; and finding that it was the Chemical Warfare Service involved, I immediately went to the heads of that Service and discussed the whole matter with them. I found that the Huntsville site was recommended by the Engineers as No. 2 out of 5 on which engineering studies had been made. Nevertheless, before I left the office, General Porter, the Chief of Chemical Warfare Service, and his executive, Colonel English, made their plans to leave this afternoon for Huntsville in order to see the site personally. I feel very good over our prospects and, of course, intend to stay behind the matter until a definite decision is reached.

After my talk with General Porter, Colonel English, and Colonel Loucks, I called Lawrence Goldsmith and discussed the matter with him, arranging for him to meet General Porter and Colonel English Sunday morning and to take them over the site.

Sincerely,

John



CONFIDENTIAL

(excerpts only)

June 16, 1941

Dear Reese:

You will be pleased to know that Saturday afternoon before the gentlemen left Washington they called me and told me that the letter of recommendation — 20 pages long — had already been prepared, would be signed before they left and would go over to the War Department ... today. Their trip was simply for the purpose of fortifying them to answer any questions ...

I believe it will go through all right. Lister thinks so, too. He promised me right off that he would go all the way for this particular site regardless of what other sites might be on the list in Alabama. This he has done.

You know, I believe, that I have been working on the Chemical Warfare proposition for three yeas or more. I knew well the last Chief, General Baker. At my request he made a trip more than two years ago to Huntsville and Decatur and Muscle Shoals, traveling simply as Mr. Baker. His visit was known only to me, Lister and the TVA. Col. English was his executive officer, as he is for the new Chief, General Porter. He has been of invaluable assistance in the present matter, making suggestions and often "grabbing the ball and running with it" himself.

Regards,

John



WESTERN UNION

1941 JUN 16 PM

Congressman John Sparkman=

:Army officials delighted may make favorable recommendation today please watch and notify me immediately when any developments pop for publication=

Reese.



(excerpts only — referencing a letter from Reese Amis to John Sparkman)

June 18, 1941

Major General William N. Porter
Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service
War Department
Washington, D. C.

Dear General Porter:

... "It is my intention to prepare for an extra edition, to be issued if Huntsville gets this plant.

... I will have a story prepared and set in type ready for release whenever you wire me that the decision has been officially made.

... The whole matter has been kept pretty quiet here, and no more than a dozen or so local people have been let in on it."

Sincerely,