

# Arkansas Post: From Deserted Village To State Park to National Memorial

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The Arkansas Post site has existed variously as a Native American settlement, French trading post, Spanish trading post, seat of Louisiana Territorial government, capital of Arkansas Territory, Confederate fort and Civil War battle site, Arkansas County seat, neglected small town, state park, and is now a national memorial. Mrs. Maude Bethel Lewis of Stuttgart was the first person to advance the idea of developing a park site at Arkansas Post, “a secluded spot where great oaks and cedars mingle their branches in a land of legend and song.” Mrs. Lewis first suggested the project to a meeting of the Arkansas Authors and Composers Society, of which she was vice president, at her home in 1923. She appealed to the membership to join her in writing state civic organizations to enlist support for a state park at Arkansas Post. As a delegate to the National Conference on State Parks, at Hot Springs, June 1926, Mrs. Lewis made an appeal for Arkansas Post to be marked as a state park. A letter to the governor, written in 1928, illustrates her determination:

Stuttgart, Ark., Dec. 19th, 1928  
Hon. Harvey Parnell  
Little Rock, Ark.

Dear Governor:

It was my great pleasure to do all in my power to elect you our governor. I am thinking of the history of our state and of our most historic spot – Arkansas Post. You will do all possible, I am sure, for the appropriation for Arkansas Post State Park. The approach to the Post is lovely in its natural beauty of aged oaks, but there is a bare field where the old fort stood, that should be landscaped; and a building would be necessary to house relics and antiques that have been promised. Then there is a timbered area, and of course a caretaker should live at park near same. The women over state I feel will be as liberal with contributions as possible, the A.F.W.C., D.A.R. Pioneers, Daughters of 1812, Daughters of the Confederacy, W.C.T.U.’s and all organizations will assist in making our state and nation more beautiful thru a lovely park on the site of our first settlement – Arkansas Post. This will come as a wonderful New Year’s gift to Arkansas. With best wishes for Xmas and the New Year to both Mrs. Parnell and yourself.

Believe me, in deep appreciation,  
Maude Bethel Lewis (Mrs. Geo. C. Lewis)

In the 1929 session of the Arkansas legislature, G. Ballard Deane of St. Charles, representative from Arkansas County, introduced a bill known as *The Arkansas Post State Park Commission*, asking appropriation for a state park at Arkansas Post. This bill passed on Feb. 27, 1929 as Act 57 of 1929, and was signed into law by Governor Harvey Parnell. Apparently, little was done to improve the place in those early years. The lack of roads and the isolation of the Post offered very little attraction for tourists. However, a newspaper article from the period does list these ongoing projects at the park: 25 benches donated by the Businessmen’s League of Gillett, concrete tables, “a good well of water reached at a

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depth of 55 feet,” a concrete well platform, a rustic bridge, and a 48-in. woven wire fence with iron posts set in cement. Logs from old homes around the area were used to construct a caretaker’s lodge, consisting of two 18 x 18 foot rooms with an open hallway 12 x 18, with two 12 x 48 foot porches. This “dogtrot” style home stood many years at the entrance of the state park. Most will recognize this as the Refeld-Hinman house now on display at the nearby state museum. The old state capitol building was excavated, unearthing many relics, with the best of the bricks used to construct the pillars at the north entrance, as well as drives and walks, and fireplaces for campers. A dam was built across a series of gullies, providing a seven acre lake. These gullies were some of the trenches used in the battle of Arkansas Post (Fort Hindman) in January, 1863.

The effort to make the state park a national facility began in the mid-1950s, through efforts of area citizens such as members of the Arkansas County Farm Bureau Federation of Women, the Grand Prairie Historical Society, and other interested parties. These groups began holding meetings to draw up support for a national park at the Post. State Rep. George O. Green of Arkansas County, and State Sen. Tom Allen of Brinkley became interested, as did U. S. Rep. William F. Norrell, 6th District, Arkansas. The National Park Service required an archeological survey of the Post before they could recommend it for inclusion in the system. Norrell, in a letter dated April 13, 1956, told Dr. H. V. Glenn of Grand Prairie Historical Society that he had “suc-cessfully secured funds for this survey, and was hopeful to later pass legislation to include Arkansas Post in the National Park System.” The survey, however, did not prove favorable to the effort at all. It stated that Arkansas Post failed to meet park service standards since no physical evidence was found of the 1686 Henri de Tonti post, the 1720s John Law Colony, any pre-1750 French establishments, or any Spanish forts or settlements. Undaunted, Rep. W. F. Norrell introduced House Resolution 13359 to the 85th Congress on July 10, 1958, as follows:

A BILL to provide for the establishment of the Arkansas Post National Park, in the State of Arkansas. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, that the Secretary of the Interior shall acquire, by gift, purchase, condemnation, or otherwise, the lands (together with any improvements thereon) known as the Arkansas Post State Park, and any other lands adjacent to such park which, in his opinion, are necessary or desirable to carry out the purposes of this Act.

Sec. 2. (a) The lands acquired under the first section of this Act shall be set aside as a public park for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the United States, and shall be designated as the Arkansas Post National Park. The Secretary of the Interior shall administer the park as a part of the national park system, subject to the provisions of the Act entitled “An Act to establish a National Park Service, and for other purposes,” approved Aug. 25, 1916 (39 Stat. 535)

(b) In order to provide for the proper development and maintenance of the park, the Secretary of the Interior shall construct and maintain therein such roads, trails, markers, buildings, and other improvements, and such facilities for the care and accommodation of visitors, as he may deem necessary.

Sec. 3. There are hereby authorized to be appropriated such sums as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act.

The National Park Service eventually decided that the Post was “of exceptional value for commemorating the important historical events associated with exploration and settlement of the Lower Mississippi Valley.” On the advice of the State Parks Commission, Rep. Norrell changed the title of his bill to name the Post a national memorial instead of a national park. The Norrell bill passed the House in

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that form and was sent over to the Senate. After nearly having the \$125,000 appropriation struck out of the bill, Sen. J. William Fulbright brought the bill up out of turn, just before Congress adjourned for the 1960 presidential conventions. It was duly passed by the Senate. On July 6, 1960, President Eisenhower signed into law the bill creating Arkansas Post National Memorial. James Place of Gillett headed a land procurement committee which eventually acquired the acreage necessary to develop the national memorial.

The deed to 740 acres of Arkansas Post land was turned over on June 23, 1964 by Governor Orval Faubus to Elbert Cox, Regional Director of the National Park Service. The occasion was the Deed Day ceremony at the Post, held on a hot summer afternoon behind the Refeld-Hinman house. On hand were many dignitaries whose efforts resulted in a first class national facility in Arkansas County. There were several state senators and representatives, National Park Service superintendents from several parks in the region, President Cora Swindler of the Grand Prairie Historical Society, Chairman Lambert Dial of the Arkansas Publicity and Parks Commission, Catherine D. Norrell, widow of the U. S. Congressman, and Dr. H. V. Glenn, past president of the Grand Prairie Historical Society and Arkansas Historical Association. The program was co-chaired by George Pike of DeWitt and Cleon Collier of Gillett. The author well remembers riding down from Stuttgart to Arkansas Post for the Deed Day ceremony, in the company of his grandfather Dr. Glenn, A. P. Finken and Mrs. C. J. Brain, one of the original members of the Arkansas Post Park Commission back in 1929.

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### Sources:

House Resolution 13359.

Lewis to Parnell letter in author's collection.

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