

Salt-Making, an Early Industry

It is not known precisely when Indians first began extracting the mineral from the earth near the Ouachita River in Clark County, but it was certainly prior to the arrival of the first European explorers. Because of its lengthy historical significance, one site near Arkadelphia, Bayou Sel, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

Hernando DeSoto's expedition was the first to document salt-making operations in Arkansas, through the writings of the "Gentleman of Elvas" who told of the Indians' primitive salt mining methods. The Indians provided DeSoto's men with some much-needed salt during their journey across Arkansas which began in 1541.

Blakelytown (now Arkadelphia) became settled by Americans in the early 1800s, shortly after the Louisiana Purchase. Then, in about 1811, John Hemphill and his large family arrived and chose to make their home here. Hemphill believed salt-making to be a worthwhile enterprise and obtained some land east of the Ouachita River for that purpose. He soon began using iron kettles for boiling the salt water and sold his product to settlers throughout the region. The venture was among Arkansas's earliest manufacturing operations. In 1814 Hemphill traveled to New Orleans and purchased a number of larger vessels, used there for boiling down sugar cane juice. Some held as much as 200 gallons. Once back in Clark County, he put the kettles to use in his ever-growing business. Hemphill died just a few years later, in 1818 or 1819. John Hemphill's widow, Nancy, leased the salt works for a time, but the arrangement did not work out. Then, her son-in-law Jonathan O. Callaway managed the operation for several years after that, but in 1851, operations ceased.

However, during the Civil War, salt became scarce, and the salt works reopened. New wells were sunk as the Confederate Army took responsibility for the site. Men worked around the clock in an effort to supply the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Army with salt. New vessels were made from the boilers of various ships sunk and abandoned along the Ouachita River. A large furnace was built for continuous operation, and remains of that structure lasted for many years. With the approach of U.S. troops under General Frederick Steele in 1864 during the Red River Campaign, operations again ceased. After the war, some effort was made to restart the mining of salt, even as late as 1875. Unfortunately, no one was able to make it a success.

Little is known about the actual appearance of the salt works facilities, but Civil War-era records refer to several buildings, two wells, and a large furnace. Portions of brick structures were found during a 1939 study of the site. Archeological excavations have uncovered evidence of considerable architectural construction and extensive habitation areas of the Indians. Detailed information about the salt works' specific location is restricted in order to protect and preserve the integrity of the site.



Salt kettle on the grounds of the Clark County Court House