

ARCADIA

A Unique Piece of State and County History

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The Arcadia Mill Site in Pea Ridge is one of the most toured historical places in Santa Rosa County. Whether visitors are there for historical information or to enjoy walking the trails, Arcadia has it all. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This is Arcadia's story.

Arcadia is the site of the first and largest Early American industrial complex in Florida. The industries included water powered saw mills, planing and lathing machines, a gristmill, a bucket and pail factory, shingle mill and cotton textile mill as well as a stone quarry and a tannery. A mule drawn railroad and an eighteen-mile long log flume provided means of transportation for the industries.

The Arcadia mill complex operated for 38 years (from 1817 to 1855). The land was initially granted to Juan de la Rua, a prominent Pensacola businessman, in 1817. Over the next eleven years he partially cleared the property and may have begun construction on a small dam. De la Rua's efforts to develop the land, however, were frustrated by labor shortages due in large part to hostile Indians who roamed by the area. Finally in 1828, he sold the property to Joseph Forsyth for \$400.00.

Forsyth, Pensacola merchant and shipper, began his work at Arcadia by quarrying sandstone for the Pensacola wharf. Soon thereafter he undertook construction of a dam and saw mill. When he ran short of money for his venture, he enlisted the financial help of Ezekiel and Andrew Simpson. Thus in 1830 the firm of Forsyth and Simpson was established and with the added capital of the Simpson brothers the sawmill on Pond Creek was soon completed.

Laborers constructed a 1,400 foot long and 15 foot high dam of earth and stone across the valley that impounded a 60-acre millpond. They built a water-powered, wooden framed, two-story sawmill on the dam and constructed a second water-powered sawmill about 350 feet downstream from the dam. A 700-foot long millrace was excavated along the dam, which carried water from the millpond to this second lumber mill. One of the saw mills ran a gang of saws, two single saws, planing machines and a circular saw while the other mill carried two single saws, a grist mill and a lathing machine.

About 1830, Timothy Twitchell bought the northeast quarter of Arcadia from Forsyth for \$ 121.00. He proceeded to dam up a small creek and excavate a flume to connect his new millpond to Arcadia. Following this he built a saw mill and shingle mill. The Arcadia Pail Factory was added in 1841.

In the thick yellow pine forests to the north and west, lumbermen were busy harvesting pine, juniper and cypress for the mills. These loggers, armed with axes and

crosscut saws, felled giant trees that stretched upwards 70 feet to the first limb. Once down, the trees were trimmed, placed on oxcarts and transported to the log flume for the trip down to the Arcadia millpond. Once in the millpond the trees were separated, the yellow pine entered the Forsyth and Simpson mills while the cypress and juniper logs were pushed into Twitchell's flume and floated down to his mills.

The Arcadia industrial complex manufactured a variety of products in the 1830's. Among there were rough and planed lumber, shingles, laths, and meal and flour. In 1836, the Arcadia mills were shipping about 5,000 square feet of lumber a week. During the first few years, these products moved by barge or wagon from Arcadia to the mouth of Pond Creek on the Blackwater River about three miles distant. The barges and wagons proved slow and inefficient however, and as the industrial output from Arcadia increased an improved means of transportation became necessary.

In 1838, Forsyth, Simpson and Twitchell chartered the Arcadia Railroad Company. Built in just 5 month, this broad, huge wooden railed, mule drawn railroad was the second oldest railway built in territorial Florida. Though primitive, the Arcadia Railroad proved somewhat more useful in transporting lumber and other products from the mills to the docks at the mouth of Pond Creek [This area later became known as Bagdad].

In the 1830's, new technology in the form of steam power came to northwest Florida. Steam engines were more efficient than water powered machinery and did not limit the location of mills to large free-flowing inland streams. Forsyth and Simpson recognized the advantages of steam power, thus in the early 1840s they moved their lumber mills to Bagdad and eliminated the transportation problems that plagued them at Arcadia.

Between 1840 and 1845 the Arcadia Mills lay silent (though Twitchell continued to produce shingles and pails at his mills). Forsyth and Simpson, however, were unable to completely let go of their beloved water-powered complex at Arcadia. In 1845 the partners formed the Arcadia Manufacturing Company and began to build a cotton textile factory. This effort represented a radical concept for the time, since most southern agricultural products were shipped to the northeast and northwestern industrialized states. Determined to develop industry in northwest Florida, Forsyth and Simpson constructed a two-story brick textile mill (94 x 38 feet) which ran 960 spindles and 24 looms. The mill was operated by 25-49 young female slaves who produced as much as 1,300 yards of cloth a day. By 1853 the Arcadia mill was the largest and most successful textile factory in Florida.

Despite the success of the Arcadia cotton textile mill, Forsyth and Simpson made little money from the venture. In 1856, Joseph Forsyth died at the age of 53 and with his passing went Arcadia. Within months of Forsyth's death, the textile mill burned and the surviving partners turned their complete attention to the very profitable lumber mills at Bagdad. Arcadia was abandoned.

During the War Between the States, Arcadia was the site of a small skirmish between Union and Confederate troops. In addition, it is believed that the dam was purposely breached or blown so that Union troops, desperate for timber, could not retool Arcadia into a lumber mill.

In the 1880's the Bagdad lumbermen decided to cut the second growth timber in the Pond Creek valley. Charles Elliott was hired to clean out the original Arcadia log flume and extend it through the Arcadia dam to the mouth of Pond Creek and the Bagdad mills.

Other than these two episodes, the Arcadia industrial complex was abandoned for 109 years. Then Mr. Warren Weekes, a local historian, rediscovered the Arcadia mill site in 1964. In the late 1960's, the Santa Rosa Historical Society acquired 30 acres and saved a part of this valuable area from destruction. Its significance was underlined when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Archaeological research in 1990-1991 uncovered a major portion of the architectural remains on the society property. Through the cooperative efforts of historians, archaeologist and interested citizens, this unique piece of Florida's history has been preserved for the education and recreation of future generations. It can now be enjoyed for its natural beauty and its historical significance.