

9-20-2016

## Salt manufacturing: One of county's earliest industries

Wendy Bradley Richter

*Arkansas State Archives*, [wendy.richter@arkansas.gov](mailto:wendy.richter@arkansas.gov)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/articles>



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Richter, Wendy Bradley, "Salt manufacturing: One of county's earliest industries" (2016). *Articles*. 169.  
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/articles/169>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

# Salt manufacturing: One of county's earliest industries

By Wendy Richter  
For the Siftings

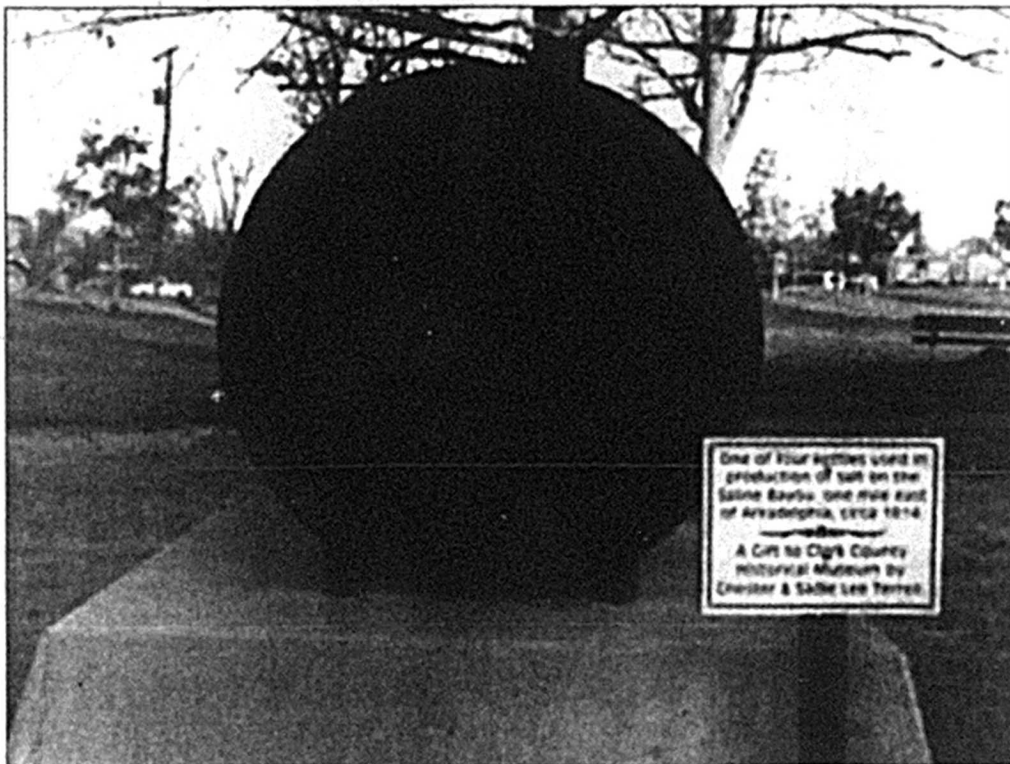
Salt manufacturing has long been a source of curiosity for many interested in southwest Arkansas's earliest days. It is not known precisely when Indians first began extracting the mineral from the earth near the Ouachita River in Clark County, but it was certainly prior to the arrival of the first European explorers. Because of its lengthy historical significance, one site, 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 river ebbed, leaving it upon the upper part of the sand...because they cannot take it without much sand mingled with it, they throw it into certain baskets which they have for the purpose, broad at the mouth and narrow at the bottom, and set it into the air upon the bar and throw

water into it, wherein it falleth. Being drained and set to boil upon the fire, when the water is a sodden away, the salt remaineth at the bottom of the pan." 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. 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 near the future site of Daleville 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.



STEVE HENNAGIN/FOR THE SIFTINGS

**This salt kettle was used in the 1800s near Arkadelphia. It is now on display at the Clark County Museum.**

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: remains of the structure lasted for many years. With the approach of U.S. troops under General Frederick Steele in 1864 during the Red River

Campaign, however, operations again ceased.

After the war, some effort was made to restart the mining of salt. J.M. and George Ashby ran such a business for a time, and even as late as 1875, the Southern Standard newspaper announced that "the old salt works will soon be in operation." 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 the large furnace. Portions of brick structures were found during a 1939 study of the site. Other archeological excavations uncovered evidence of considerable architectural construction and extensive habitation areas of the Indians.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum ([www.clark-countyhistory.org](http://www.clark-countyhistory.org) or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library ([www.obu.edu/archives](http://www.obu.edu/archives) or 245-5332).