

Georgia "History Series"

CONFEDERATE POWDER WORKS

The beginning of the War Between the States in 1861 found the South woefully unprepared. Throughout the South it had not been expected that the North would seriously oppose a secession of the Southern states from the Union, hence no provisions or war materiel had been gathered.

Manufacturing in the South was on a very limited scale, and there were no factories for war purposes. Hence their speedy construction was of extreme urgency and had to be accomplished under the most unfavorable conditions.

At the beginning of the conflict, the entire supply of gunpowder in the Confederacy was scarcely sufficient for one month of active operations, and not a pound was being manufactured. A small amount of gunpowder was captured with the Norfolk Navy Yard. A small cargo of saltpeter and sulphur (two basic essentials of gunpowder) was purchased in Philadelphia and arrived safely in Savannah before that port was blockaded.

Plans were made to charter a ship to import saltpeter from Liverpool, England, but could not be carried out on account of the effective blockade at the mouth of the Mississippi river. However, the Confederate government through its agents in Europe, was able to purchase quantities of saltpeter, which was shipped by blockade runners, arriving in Charleston and Wilmington ports.

At the outbreak of the war, George Washington Rains, Confederate soldier, inventor and author, and a native of North Carolina, was given a *carte blanche* assignment for the procurement of gunpowder for the Confederacy. Peculiarly fitted for his assignment, Col. Rains had served as assistant professor of chemistry, geology and mineralogy at West Point Military Academy, where he had previously graduated. He had also served as president of a large iron works in the North for several years, and during 1860 and 1861 he had obtained patents on several of his inventions relating to steam engines and boilers.

After a rapid tour of the South to find a suitable site for the location of a powder plant, Augusta was chosen because of its central location, canal transportation, water power, railroad facilities and for its security from attack by reason of its location far back of the fighting front. The Confederacy needed the new Powder Works for reasons of economy, even if there had been no other reasons

—the extreme hazard of importing gunpowder through the blockade had raised its average price to \$3.00 per pound during the very first year of the war.

Augusta also was the site of the U. S. Arsenal. This had been seized with all its arms at the outbreak of the war by orders of Joseph E. Brown, Georgia governor. Converted by the Confederacy from a storage depot into a manufacturing armory, ordnance materiel was produced at the Arsenal. Churches gave up their bells to be cast into canon, and one old Southern mansion in the city is said to have given some 2,000 pounds of sash weights to be moulded into bullets.

In July, 1861, Col. Rains selected a site for the Powder Works, one half mile from the western city limits. All of the land between the canal and river for a distance of two miles was included in the site.

Much of the heavier machinery for the Powder Works was manufactured in Richmond, while some of the lighter machinery was made in Macon, Chattanooga, Nashville, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans, as well as Augusta.

Col. Rains initiated the wholesale collection of saltpeter from the limestone caves in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and North Carolina. Thus it was that material was collected from all parts of the southland for the construction and operation of the Powder Works.

Following the manufacturing processes of the Waltham Abbey Government Gunpowder Works of England, the Confederate Powder Works is said to have been the largest in the world at that time. Its daily output varied with the demand for gunpowder and with the amount of saltpeter on hand. At no time after its completion was it operated to full capacity. There was made at the Confederate Powder Works from April 10, 1862, to April 18, 1865, 2,750,000 pounds of gunpowder. This was distributed throughout the Confederacy, mostly east of the Mississippi.

Of the once extensive Confederate Powder Works nothing remains except the great chimney. Its battlemented tower and lofty shaft remain to this day a monument to the Confederacy.

The Sibley Cotton Mill later was erected on a portion of the site, and so arranged that the Confederate obelisk stands conspicuously in the front.