

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY JANUARY 2



WEST VIRGINIA
STATE ARCHIVES

Explosives Plant "C."
GENERAL VIEW, SEDIMENTATION BASIN & AREA "A" IN FOREGROUND
No. 651. November 28, 1918.

Official groundbreaking ceremonies for the explosives plant at Nitro were held on January 2, 1918.

CSO: SS.8.9, SS.8.24

Investigate the Document: (Eugene Harper Collection, Ms2004-083)

1. Using the date listed on the correspondence, what was the purpose of cancelling the construction of the powder plant being constructed in Nitro?
2. What was the intended purpose of the powder plant?
3. How many pounds of powder was Explosives Plant C expected to produce daily upon completion of the plant?
4. Who was the President during World War I?
5. What happened to Nitro following World War I?

Think Critically: Why did the United States abandon neutrality and enter WWI? How did WWI benefit the American economy? What other prominent West Virginia industry was vital to the war effort? How so?

*1918
Nitro
Shutting Down*

R. G. 156
Correspondence
Box 6
File: Nitro Shutting Down

Shut down

C O P Y

Nov. 21, 1918.

U. S. Government Explosives Plants,

Office of Director of Purchase, Storage and Traffic,

PROPOSED CANCELLATION OF CONTRACT FOR CONSTRUCTION
OF POWDER PLANT BEING ERECTED AT NITRO, W. VA.

1. In accordance with paragraph 2, Supply Circular No. 114, the following information is given, with the request for authority to suspend or cancel contracts for the plans for and construction of U.S. Government Smokeless Cannon Powder Plant, now being erected at Nitro, West Virginia.

2. Location of New Facility.

Nitro, about 10 miles distant from
Charleston, W. Va.

3. Purpose of such facility.

To manufacture smokeless cannon powder.

4. Final estimate of cost authorized by^t
not wholly contracted.

\$65,000,000.

5. Cost to date.

Copy
\$55,000,000. (Approximately) Including
unadjusted contracts and purchases. No detailed figures available.

6. Percentage completion.

x The original contracts let to Graham, Anderson, Probst and White and Thompson-Starrett Company contemplated plans for and erection of a smokeless powder plant, with a capacity of 500,000 pounds per day, together with necessary accessories needed through construction. The work contemplated under the original contract may be said to be 90% to 95% complete, but it is difficult to now separate work under original from that under supplemental contract.

x The estimated capacity of the plant was subsequently increased, resulting in increased work for the contractors. In addition to this, the housing of the necessary employes under the employ of the Hercules Powder Company has added materially to the original plans for caring for the employes. The work contemplated at the time of

#2 O. Director, Purchase, Storage & Traffic.

the signing of the armistice was 75% to 85% completed.

7. Number of Laborers Employed at this Date.

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Superintendents and Clerks, | 450 |
| Hospital, Commissary, Municipal Organization | 2700 |
| Government Supervision, | 100 |
| Designing Engineers, | 70 |
| Mechanical trades | 2550 |
| Common Laborers, | 850 |
| Total, | <u>6720</u> |

On November 12th, the total employes, exclusive of those employed by the Hercules Powder Company numbered above 12,540, showing a reduction in force of almost 6,000 in the first week after the signing of the armistice. It has been impossible up to this time to reduce the employes listed in the first four items above in the same proportion but proper reductions are now under way.

The large number employed in connection with the hospital, commissary and the municipal organization is in part due to the fact that these organizations are at present caring for not only the employes of the United States Government Explosives Plants, but in addition between 5,000 and 6,000 employes of the Hercules Powder Company, which is operating the completed units.

An exact classification of the mechanics employed on this date cannot be given, but the following percentages applied to the mechanics of November 15th:

| | | | |
|----------------------|-------|----------------|-----|
| Blacksmiths, | .64 | Machinists, | .6 |
| Bridgemen, | 5. | Millwrights, | 3.6 |
| Carpenters, | 35.71 | Pipe Layers, | 1.3 |
| Chauffeurs, | 1.7 | Pipe Coverers, | .64 |
| Electricians, | 2.6 | Painters, | 1.0 |
| Engineers, | 3.3 | Plumbers, | 4. |
| Firemen, | 1.3 | Railroad Crews | 2.3 |
| Leadburners, | .64 | Steamfitters, | 7.3 |
| Leadburners Helpers, | .64 | " " helpers | 8.6 |
| Linemen, | 3.6 | Tinsmiths | 3.2 |
| Masons, | 3.2 | Welders | 0.3 |

#3. O. Director, Purchase, Storage & Traffic.

Advice has been received from Mr. Harold Stone, U. S. Department of Labor, Employment Service, that with one week's notice their Department can furnish employment for five hundred to six hundred common laborers per day and quite a large number of mechanics of various kinds, and that probably work can be offered to all of the mechanics for experience has shown that the majority of them prefer to return home, rather than to go to some other point for employment.

8. Reason for Cancellation.

Lack of present or probable future need for large quantities of smokeless cannon powder.

9. Recommendation of method of suspension and number of men that will be retained.

The policy recommended is as follows:

All further construction work to cease; All portions of the plant which are now complete to be left in best possible condition to minimize the damage of time or the elements. Those buildings of the plant which are partially complete, but which are nearing completion, be roofed over where necessary and closed in so as to protect any machinery or supplies which are stored therein, so as to minimize the deterioration through time and the elements. Machinery to be properly protected and left under such condition as to minimize deterioration through time and the elements. All construction materials on the ground and all machinery in ordinary commercial use which is salable at a fair valuation to be so stored as to be readily loaded on cars if and when sold. All horses and mules to be sold immediately at the best possible figure. All perishable materials to be sold without delay at the best possible prices. Plant to be left with proper caretakers under Government control.

This suspension of work would release all present employees except those necessary as care-takers, and those which might be necessary in loading and shipping material to be sold.

U. S. GOVERNMENT EXPLOSIVES PLANTS,

D. C. JACKLING, Director,

By:

S. W. MUDD,
Colonel, U.S.A.
Assistant Director.

*Proposed inscription for plaque at City Park
authored by Ken Sullivan*

The city of Nitro was born in 1917 and 1918, out of the great struggle of World War I. Americans entered the European conflict belatedly, but they entered with the unbounded confidence that they must do their part in this "war to end all wars." President Woodrow Wilson promised that the nation's object was "to make the world safe for democracy," and young men flocked to recruitment stations by the tens of thousands. In West Virginia the "boys of '17" gathered at county courthouse steps, and their comrades were sworn in at other points across the country.

The United States did not lack manpower for its American Expeditionary Force, but in other ways the nation was unprepared. As Secretary of War Newton D. Baker noted, "the demands of the modern fighting force for munitions are constant and all but insatiable." To meet this need, sites were chosen to build munitions plants. One of these was the future site of Nitro, 1,800 acres of farmland on the Kanawha River on the Kanawha-Putnam County line.

Explosives Plant C, the proposed munitions complex for Nitro, was to produce more than a half-million pounds of powder daily, employing an army of civilians laboring around the clock. An operation of this vast magnitude required an entire city to support it, and the building of the town went on simultaneously with the construction of Plant C. Thousands of workers poured into the area, exempted from military duty for this special service on the home front. It was decided to name the

new community for nitrocellulose, an ingredient in the munitions manufacturing process.

Construction proceeded rapidly, with 3,400 buildings eventually completed. There were 2,000 prefabricated bungalows for workers' families, a large hospital, schools, churches, hotels, barracks, boarding houses, stores, and places of amusement. Even these sprawling facilities proved insufficient as population grew to 25,000. Almost overnight Nitro became one of the half-dozen largest cities in West Virginia, with a population comparable to that of Fairmont at the time.

Unfortunately, World War I did not end all wars, but American involvement was mercifully brief. At President Wilson's urging Congress declared war on April 6, 1917, with the first U. S. troops reaching the battlefields of France in late June. Even as the country rushed to mobilize on the home front, American intervention was pushing the war toward conclusion. Many thousands of American soldiers died - 120,000 were killed or wounded in the final Meuse-Argonne offensive alone - but other thousands failed to reach the war zone before Armistice Day, November 11, 1918.

Victory left America an uncontested global power for the first time in its history, the former colonies now an equal with the mightiest nations of the Old World. It left Nitro with the world's largest munitions plant, in a world suddenly at peace. As one state historian noted, "The last shot of World War I was a shot into the heart of the most fabulous boom town West Virginia had ever seen."

Plant C was never brought fully into production, and the

Armistice left mountains of sulphur and baled cotton, and other unused materials, at the site. Nitro emptied as quickly as it filled up, and the government investment of \$70,000,000 or more was transferred to private hands for \$8,500,000. Prefabricated houses were sold off to coal companies, and in many places still-new sidewalks led only to bare foundations. For a while it appeared that Nitro would become a ghost town, and the rich bottom land revert back to farming.

But slowly and painfully Nitro made the transition to peacetime production. War's end and the postwar economic slump reduced the town to a fraction of its former size, but gradually the leftover stocks of raw materials were converted to the manufacture of chemicals, synthetic fibers, and other products. Nitro survived, and in the 1950's again enjoyed a period of rapid growth. Today it prospers as one of West Virginia's major industrial centers.

Nitro has ever been mindful of its unique place in history. On September 7, 1982, the City Council by unanimous vote constituted the city a "living memorial to World War I." Their resolution was effective Armistice Day, November 11, 1982, in the 65th year of the city's history.