

Penniman and the Powder Plant Boom

Williamsburg in World War I

by Will Molineux

THE WHISPERS of the boom about to blast Williamsburg from its celebrated slumber began to rumble through town early in 1916. By rumor, E. I. DuPont de Nemours & Company had land agents in the area. By report, surveyors were measuring a York River plant site east of the city. If such hearsay could be credited, a munitions factory was about to be built next door. For good or ill, old Williamsburg stood foursquare in the line of fire of a modern industrial development.

Five years before and two counties away, DuPont had opened a dynamite mill on a 17th-century James River plantation, Hopewell, near City Point at the confluence of the Appomattox. In 1914, DuPont enlarged the plant to manufacture artillery-shell gun cotton; World War I began that August and the market was expanding. Within a year, a lawless tarpaper town of 40,000 workers, wives, kids, merchants, gamblers, saloon-keepers, and prostitutes bustled around the factory.

About 35 miles

away as the crow flies, Williamsburg dozed on. The town forgot 1912's municipal election and voted a year later to let the town clock wind down.

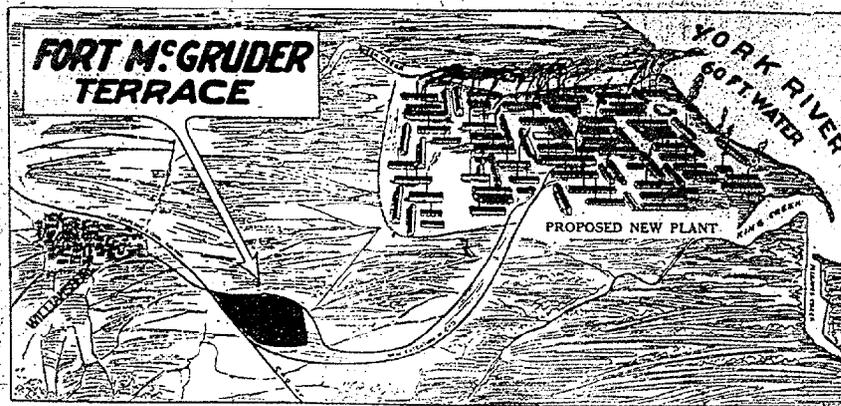
Williamsburg, nevertheless, was aware of the times and the dangers they held. Late in 1915, Williamsburg women began winding Red Cross bandages and surgical dressings for monthly shipment to Europe. By war's end, they had made 35,696.

Fire destroyed Hopewell, as DuPont's combustible town had come to be called, December 9, 1915. It was

rebuilt on a more respectable model. DuPont decided to look elsewhere to expand its Virginia operations and meet wartime demands from France and Great Britain. In November word got out the company was interested in Jamestown Island, the downstream shallow-water site of the first permanent English settlement in America. There were, however, objections to the industrialization of a place so historically sensitive, and the company's eye turned to a more economically sensible tract on the lower reach of the deep-water York.

Just three miles away, Williamsburg was about to be shaken from its somnambulance by the construction of a high explosives plant.

IN February 1916, DuPont confirmed the plant-construction rumors. By then there had been weeks of delirious rumors and reckless land speculation. In March the company formally announced it would build on 4,200 York County acres between Queens and



PLATS NOW READY

The First Opportunity to Choose Your Lots at

WILLIAMSBURG

Proposed New Dynamite, Powder or Munitions Plant

Come to our office at 9 A. M. To-Morrow and Get First Choice.

Richmond Times-Dispatch

The fanciful rendition of DuPont's industrial site, above, which appeared in a Richmond real estate advertisement March 15, 1916, didn't exaggerate the Penniman project's scope. The panorama of the plant, below, was made June 6, 1918.

Library of Congress



Kings creeks. DuPont named the \$500,000 complex Penniman in honor of Russell Sylvanus Penniman, the inventor of ammonia dynamite.

There was a frenzy of real estate activity in Williamsburg and adjacent farms and woodlands. Speculators—mostly from Richmond and Newport News—platted and recorded subdivisions. They bought up farms and, without regard to topography, laid out streets and marked off building lots. Residential property and businesses in the city changed hands. Citizens of the long-impooverished city accepted what seemed to them generous offers. Williamsburg was, as a headline in the March 8 issue of Richmond's *Times-Dispatch* said, "agog over unexpected boom."

"Usually the quietest place of its size in the state," the newspaper reported, "Williamsburg has suddenly sprung into prominence and every train brings in strangers who swarm the streets, inspect property and talk business, backing up the talk with unlimited cash."

On March 28, a month after DuPont's announcement, 150 small homesites were sold in East Williamsburg, a subdivision off Capitol Landing Road. Prices ranged from \$150 to \$200 for lots with frontages of 50 feet and depths of 110 feet.

Housing developments were mapped on the town's James City and York county boundaries. There was Kenton Park, advertised to be "in the heart of Williamsburg," and Delta Park at the gates of Penniman. There was

The Penniman water tower and power plant, right and far right, easily can be located in the panoramic photograph taken by John A. Dick. The York River is in the distance to the right

Bruton Heights, and Bruton Park, and Fort Magruder Terrace—that would have, had not the United Daughters of the Confederacy intervened, obliterated the Civil War fort. There was West Williamsburg, and Capitol Heights, and Palace Heights, and Forest Heights, and Powhatan Park. In all there were 18 subdivisions.

Boom times, indeed.

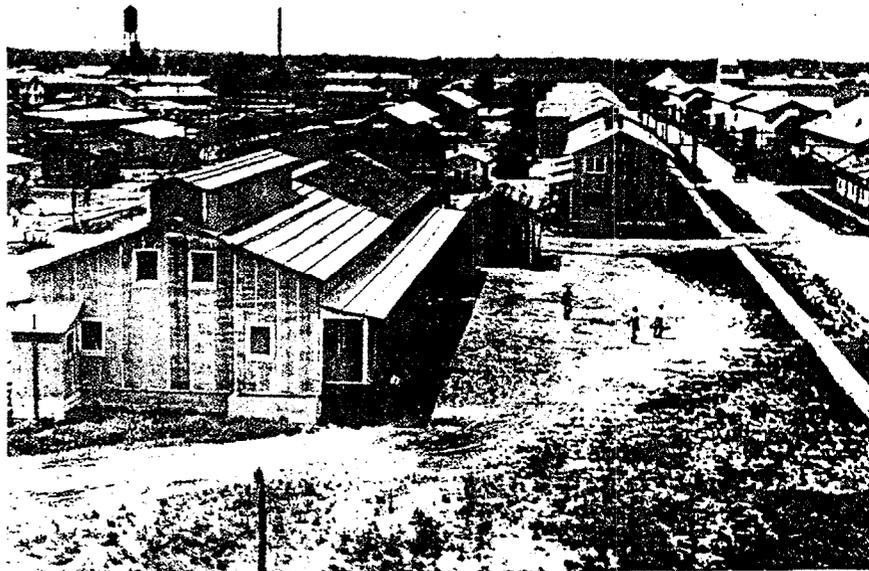
On April 4, construction began on a spur of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway that branched off from Beale's Crossing, southeast of Williamsburg to connect the city with the plant. The line was needed to take construction materials to the Penniman site.

The air went out of the real estate balloon the same day with DuPont's announcement that Penniman would employ "not more than 200 men." Thousands had been predicted. The freight cars started rolling in early June. But by the end of the summer, the size and the future of the plant were in doubt, and construction slowed.

Few homes were built grandly named and deceptive advertised subdivisions. At least prominent Williamsburg business caught up in the real estate fever broke. The city's weekly newspaper *Virginia Gazette*, reported May 1917 that J. T. Van Smith "has fol- tent and like the Turk of old, s- stolen away."

But before they were done, a surface road as well as the rail spur linked Williamsburg with man. Steamships docked at the And progress called at Williams

The city's health officer cited property owners for unsanitary tions. The city awoke to the n provide water and sewer system for a municipal power plant \$36,000 cost of installing water and sewer lines was covered by issue and a \$45 connection fee Williamsburg Power Compar stalled street lamps, but the gen that served the city periodically



Department of Defense photo, Courtesy R. Wy



PATRIOTIC SPIRIT filled Williamsburg's people even before the United States declared war against Germany on April 7, 1917. At a mass meeting that March in the colonial courthouse on the Duke of Gloucester Street, they adopted a resolution pledging to "faithfully cooperate in any measures deemed advisable by President Woodrow Wilson and Congress for repelling the assaults of Germany."

Lyon G. Tyler, president of the College of William and Mary, offered the measure. On the campus, students and faculty, after considerable debate, called for severing diplomatic relations with Germany and "proclaiming a state of armed neutrality."

A prominent young Williamsburg woman, Harriet Hankins, was already in eastern Europe as a Red Cross nurse. James S. Watt, a Scotsman in Williamsburg, had enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders, been in fierce fighting on the Western Front, and for a

time was feared dead.

When the United States entered the war, William and Mary students petitioned the faculty to engage a drillmaster for them. He was Captain J. B. Puller of the Richmond Light Infantry Blues.

To encourage armed forces enlistments, hundreds of Marines, led by a band from the dreadnought *Pennsylvania*, then in Hampton Roads, marched Saturday, April 21, from the college to the Courthouse Green and a recruiting rally of oratory and song. There was a military ball that evening in the Colonial Inn. Initially, a few men from campus and the town volunteered and the *Gazette* chided "slackers," but by summertime several more had left for training camps.

There was apprehension about the future of Penniman. Come April, the plant was dormant. Charles K. Weston, a DuPont public relations executive in Wilmington, Delaware, wrote to the *Gazette* in a letter published the

5th: "This plant is for purely commercial purposes and has nothing whatever to do with the manufacture of any type of munitions of war."

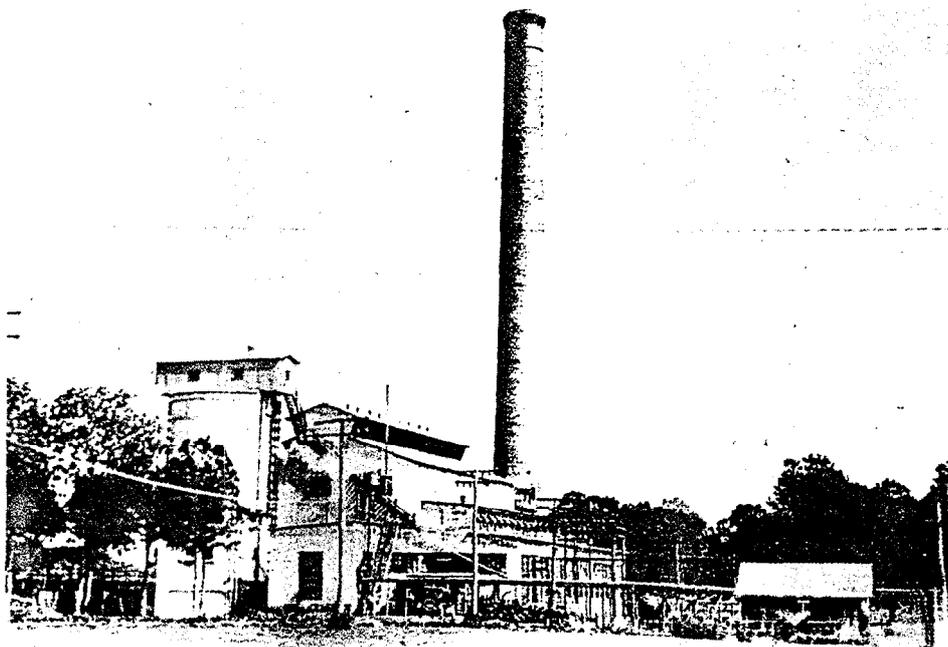
The demand for "this special grade of high explosive," Weston said, "has not materialized." What Weston did not then explain was that DuPont had designed and outfitted Penniman to produce dynamite from nitro-starch to avoid paying the high price of nitro-glycerine, and that the market for this less-expensive product had vanished. The plant never produced any dynamite, and, when the United States entered the war, the *Daily Press* of Newport News described Penniman as "a loafing vagrant."

Weston, however, announced May 25, that DuPont had secured a government contract to assemble artillery shells and had begun to convert and expand the Penniman facilities for the assignment. DuPont also began to expand its 200-person workforce.

A June rally for Liberty Loan Bonds brought almost \$3,300 in immediate subscriptions. Church groups and school children purchased War Savings Stamps. The *Gazette* published names of citizens who paid \$1 to join the American Red Cross. The 26th of that month, the first United States troops arrived in France.

On July 4, near Paris, Colonel Charles E. Stanton, a quartermaster officer, stood before the tomb of a Williamsburg hero, and said, "Lafayette we are here."

In the meantime, Penniman began to marshal its own army to meet its contract, and, as in every war, the greedy thought on ways to separate the company's foot soldiers from their pay. The *Gazette's* editor, W. C. Johnston, wrote that the mere fact the Penniman workers "will command high wages is no excuse for Williamsburg's



Department of Defense photo, Courtesy R. Wythe Davis



trying to squeeze and gouge them because for the moment we have them at our mercy. The most insane thing we could possibly do now would be to put our prices for everything so high that it will force the DuPonts to erect a village of their own for their men and their families."

That was exactly what DuPont would do. In early 1918, after the plant was retooled and expanded to load explosives in shell casings manufactured elsewhere, the company made of Penniman a community, a town of 250 homes.

It raised dormitories, a large administrative building, a Y.M.C.A. building for dances, basketball games, and worship services, a baseball field, a post office, restaurants, a movie theater, an infirmary, stores, and quarters for a bank. At the request of women workers, a "shampoo parlor" was provided.

Penniman had its own water and sewer systems, and its own power plant. The streets were covered with crushed stone and designated by letters of the alphabet. There was a police force and something Williamsburg didn't have at the time—an organized fire department. DuPont charged a monthly rent of \$10 for a five-room bungalow.

And none too soon. By September 1917, the Penniman people had rented every available room in Williamsburg's homes, hotels, and boarding houses. A proposal to quarter men in what had been the Williamsburg Female Seminary was rejected, but the old Wil-

liamsburg Hotel, in need of repair, was fixed up for them. An enterprising man from New York, Moe Marx, put cots in the abandoned knitting mill near the railway station behind the Palace site and operated what was known as the Stag Hotel.

In 1918, the government opened military bases on the James and York rivers. The Army acquired Mulberry Island and land near Lee Hall for Camp Eustis and the Navy purchased the colonial estate of York View and 11,000 acres downstream from Penniman for a mine depot. Farmers at Grove feared their fields, too, would be commandeered.

The men assigned to build the artillery firing points and magazines at Eustis "thronged the streets" of Williamsburg on Saturdays to shop and, as the commerce-minded *Gazette* would note, "send money home."

Nicholson Street's Mary Haldane Begg Coleman wrote of those days:

The old era vanished entirely. Rumors of rising land values as a result of the advent of munitions works, training camps, etc., battle-ships in the York River, soldiers' wives seeking board and lodging, all created a chaos that one can hardly believe now. Roads improved. There was frantic construction of every kind. Eating houses and bootlegging establishments sprang up everywhere.

THE FIRST MEN the Williamsburg Military Board sent to war were Clarence Martin and Ellsworth P. Ayers. At 10:37 a.m. on September 5, 1917, they boarded a Chesapeake & Ohio Railway train for induction at Camp Lee near Petersburg. Eventually, 405 men from Williamsburg and James City County registered for the draft and of them 197 were inducted.

Two well-known Williamsburg



While Penniman bustled, ox carts were still being used to deliver goods in Williamsburg, right. Rows of navy supply warehouses at Cheatham Annex, far right, replace the Penniman community.

Colonial Williamsburg



families each had three men in uniform. There were the three sons of William and Mary Professor J. Lesslie Hall: John Lesslie Hall, Jr., an Annapolis graduate and a lieutenant in the Navy; Channing M. Hall, another future mayor of Williamsburg who was an Army officer in France; and Joseph Farland Hall, who enlisted in the Marine Corps.

There were as well the three sons of Thomas H. Geddy, clerk of the circuit court and a member of the draft board: T. H. Geddy, Jr., who served in the Medical Corps in France; George Benjamin Geddy, who trained as an aviation mechanic; and Vernon M. Geddy, who served as an artillery officer at Fort Monroe. Vernon Geddy became Colonial Williamsburg's first president of record, and afterwards its counsel and senior vice president.

Nathaniel Jennings, who had taught school at Five Forks, west of town, went overseas, and was killed.

Two brothers from Grove, Enos and Ernest Lewis, also went and didn't return. Two more brothers, Charles and John Piggott, left farmers' fields near Toano and were assigned to a labor battalion in France to load trucks to the front.

Earl Allison Thomas, from a farm near Magruder, was killed. Bledsoe Hooper enlisted in the Richmond Grays and died of battle wounds. So did Leonard Opheim.

BY THE SPRING of 1918, Penniman had a population of at least 6,000—three times Williamsburg's. There were day and night production lines for small and large caliber artillery shells and for aerial bombs.

At its peak, the plant employed 10,000 people, perhaps more. In one day—April 8, Liberty Day—Penniman residents and workers purchased \$196,000 in Liberty Bonds and do-

nated \$3,000 to the Red Cross.

Business thrived in Williamsburg. Demand overcame capacity. "Everybody," the *Gazette* reported in April 1918, "is learning to line up when they want anything." Store clerks who "used to loaf half the time are too busy to wait on customers with promptness. It is a wonderful change in mode of living."

In June, DuPont said that when Penniman was completed it would be one of the largest plants of its kind in the country.

Sisters Katherine and Agnes Morecock, who lived in Williamsburg on Francis Street, remembered visiting Penniman and noted the tight security—"policemen every ten feet," Agnes said in a 1956 oral history—and the employment opportunities afforded women, who measured gunpowder. Agnes Morecock said:

Florence Sweeney was a girl who lived here in town who worked on different shifts down there. Sometimes she'd get home at four o'clock in the morning and leave at twelve, and so on. Somebody said to her, "Well, you're making plenty of money." She said, "Yes, but my God, how am I ever going to spend it? I'm too tired when I get home, and who in the world can spend any money at four o'clock in the morning?"

A contingent of soldiers was stationed at Penniman to inspect the ordnance shipped by rail to the port in Newport News. Though relations between civilians and servicemen were generally harmonious, the weekly column in the *Gazette* of "Penniman News of Interest" once noted that "a pretty hot scrape" broke out after a civilian accused a soldier of being a "trench dodger."

Occasionally there were complaints that servicemen and civilians from Penniman were rowdy when they visited Williamsburg. "Not only do they make themselves obnoxious to our women-folk on the streets," an annoyed citizen wrote anonymously to the *Gazette*, "but when night comes they seem to try to see how noisy and



Dave Doody

generally disagreeable they can be"—especially when they missed the last night train.

THERE WERE MOMENTS of morè gravity. On October 8, 1918 Corporal Alvin York single-handedly captured 132 Germans. That day, in the same general region of the Argonne Forest, Private Walter Adolph Menzel, a James City County farmer, was killed while doing, it was reported without explanation, "secret duty."

Before he returned home in 1919, Ells Ayers wrote of his experience with the A.E.F.:

There were frequent artillery duels, occasional bursts of machine-gun fire and a good deal of aerial activity, but we had the protection of good, deep trenches. It was interesting, if not pleasing, to watch the work of destruction of the German artillery and I used to frequently, during the first few days, to stand out on the parapet and watch the shells bursting in the village of Bouzaincourt, a few hundred yards below us, but one day an overhead shrapnel failed to detonate and landed very close to where I was standing. After that I stuck to the trenches. . . .

At the time of the signing of the Armistice we were . . . close enough to the front to hear the last guns fired.

WHEN THE GUNS fell silent in Europe at 11 A.M. November 11, 1918, the people of Williamsburg filled Bruton Parish Church for a communal service "to return thanks for victory and peace" that ended with the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner."

At Penniman, as DuPont was beginning to close down its production lines, an explosion at 3:00 a.m. November 15 killed four men and injured four others.

The company had invested millions of dollars in Penniman—perhaps more than \$10 million—yet only a few shells assembled at the plant may have reached the battlefield in time to be fired before the Armistice.

In Williamsburg there was speculation based on wishful thinking and the absence of any official announcement that the chemical company would convert its Penniman facilities to some peacetime use. But before November was over, DuPont was releasing hundreds of workers a day.

By February 1919 the *Gazette* was anxiously suggesting that the federal government take over the "finely equipped plant as an arsenal." Meanwhile, Williamsburg merchants were reducing their prices to keep business activity brisk.

The area military bases established in 1918 mitigated for Williamsburg the economic downturn caused by the closure of Penniman. But in 1919, three years after a wartime bond issue to pave the Duke of Gloucester

Street had been adopted, Williamsburg was still debating the expenditure. There had been no bidders for the contract. In March 1919 the city fathers were undecided whether to fill mud holes or lay down macadam.

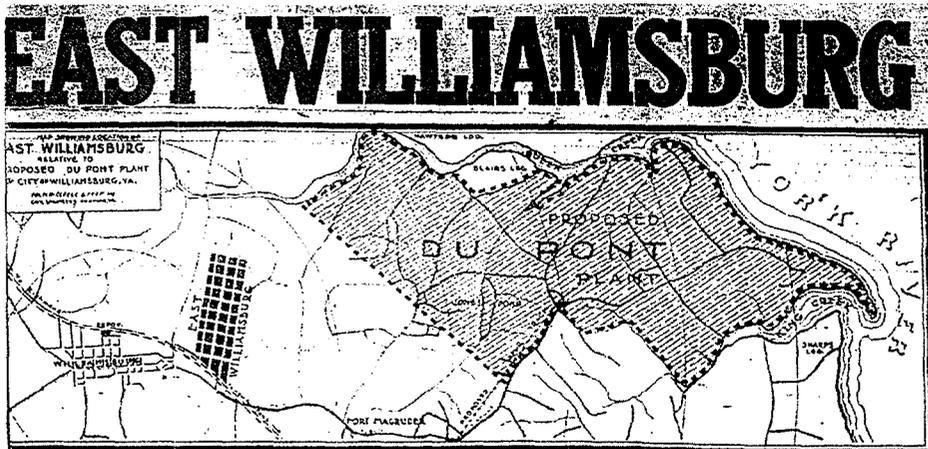
There was also a strong community initiative to, as the *Gazette* said in its roundabout way, "formulate a scheme whereby Williamsburg will be given some sort of protection against fire." A fire department was organized by public subscription.

THE SACRIFICE OF those who from the Williamsburg community died was honored on a misty Saturday, March 15, 1919. The citizenry gathered at 3:00 p.m. on Palace Green to read poetry, to hear a solemn address, to sing "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginia," and to plant a row of memorial trees so as "to keep before us the debt we owe."

By May, the passenger trains to Penniman stopped running. By summertime the government leased the plant from DuPont. Some of the buildings were taken down. Many of the Penniman bungalows were sold and trucked to vacant lots in Williamsburg and elsewhere on the Peninsula. Fewer than 200 people remained at Penniman by mid-August, and the open land was leased for cattle grazing and farming. The salvage work at the plant continued at a slow pace for almost a year.

In June 1943, a little more than a decade after the National Park Service built the Colonial Parkway through the Penniman tract, the Navy took over the river site for a supply assembly depot and shipping point. Named in honor of Rear Admiral Joseph J. Cheatham, a supply officer, it is today an annex of the Naval Supply Center at Norfolk.

Will Molineux wrote about George Washington biographer Parson Weems in the spring 2000 journal. For this article, he acknowledges the research help of retired Navy Captain R. Wythe Davis of Williamsburg, former commander of Cheatham Annex.



As Agents for the owner of the first subdivision to be placed on the market at Williamsburg, Va., we make the following announcements:

Richmond Times-Dispatch