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Penniman and the Powder Plant Boom

The following article was published in the Journal of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation summer 2000 issue. This is part one of a three-part series on DuPont's Penniman Plant. Between 1916 and 1918, the plant was located on the land where Naval Weapons Station Yorktown Cheatham Annex is now located. For this article, Will Molineux acknowledges the research help of retired Navy Capt. R. Wythe.

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 the 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



Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library

Penniman shell loading plant, 1918

gical 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, Dec. 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

Kings creeks. DuPont named the \$500,000 complex 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 - plotted 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, 1916, issue of the *Richmond 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 the East Williamsburg, a subdivision off Capital 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 Bruton Heights, and Bruton Park, and Fort Magruder Terrace - that would have, had not the United Daughters of 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.