

The Confederates Move the Powder Works

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As we discussed in previous episodes, the Confederate Powder Works at Augusta, Georgia was one of the engineering marvels of the Civil War. In a new nation that was blockaded and with little industry but in desperate need of ammunition, the Powder Works filled a vital role by supplying ample amounts of high quality gunpowder. Under the direction of Colonel George Washington Rains over three million pounds of powder were produced in Augusta between April 1862 and April 1865.

One of the little known stories regarding the Powder Works occurred in late 1864. When William Sherman's Union army took Atlanta on November 15, 1864 the news of the defeat quickly radiated throughout Georgia. Augusta, about 150 miles due east of Atlanta, was particularly vulnerable. In addition to the Powder Works, the Augusta Arsenal also was housed in the lightly guarded city. A ragtag defense comprised of about 4,000 militia and men and boys either too old or too young for the regular army stood against Sherman's 60,000 veteran troops.

George Rains was determined to save the Powder Works. As Sherman's men began to move east from Atlanta, he considered two choices. To stay and fight would almost certainly mean the end of the Confederate's gunpowder supply and the war. His second choice, logistically almost incomprehensible, was to move the Powder Works out of Sherman's path. But where could he find another location in the South that was not already under Union control or within striking range of Union cavalry?

On November 21, 1864, Rains put his men to work on their most difficult job of the war. They were going to dismantle the machinery of the Powder Works and ship it

via the South Carolina Railroad over the Savannah River to Columbia, South Carolina. There it could be reassembled for future use or returned to Augusta after Sherman had passed. It was a massive effort and must have required full use of every man available. William Pendleton, Superintendent of the Powder Works, kept a meticulous daily log that has allowed historians a detailed window into the Powder Works. But from November 22 until December 6, 1864, the log book is blank. Obviously, Pendleton was too occupied with the machinery move to take any notes. One of his last entries on November 21 said that workforce was involved with “Taking down Machinery” and “...shipping stores and machinery to Columbia, South Carolina.”

As incredible as it must have seemed to Rains, Sherman bypassed Augusta completely. His goal along had been to get his army to Savannah to get resupplied. By early December he was well past Augusta and headed toward the coast. Pendleton’s log begins again on December 6 and indicates that he and Rains were in Columbia supervising the shipment of the machinery back to Augusta. It must have been quite a bit more complicated to reassemble the machinery of the Powder Works than to disassemble it as it was not until late December 1864 that the Powder Works were back in full operation and supplying the Confederate armies.

As Sherman moved north in February 1865 there was a brief scare and Rains again ordered the men to begin disassembly of the machines. However, with a couple of days it was obvious that Sherman was bypassing Augusta a second time and the Powder Works were quickly put back into working order. Rains and his men would continue to produce high quality gunpowder until the second half of April 1865 when their work was no longer needed.