

# COUNTDOWN TO JAMESTOWN



#10 2003-REMEMBERING ISABEL (*SPRING 05*)

#9 1970-ANNEXATION (*SUMMER 05*)

## #8 1912-WHEN (GUN) COTTON WAS KING

By Dennis Farmer, Historic Specialist for Chesterfield Parks & Recreation



In 1912, Chesterfieldians, along with the rest of America, voted in Woodrow Wilson of Virginia as president. Women's suffrage and the prohibition of alcohol were issues in the minds of residents. Soon the winds of foreign war began to intrude in Southside Virginia. Old Chesterfield families, such as the Eppes, sold off hundreds of acres to a new industrial firm, the E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co. DuPont began building a dynamite plant on the old "Hopewell Farm" in 1913.

DuPont held a monopoly in ammunition manufacture in the United States. They, alone, produced gun cotton, absolutely vital in any warfare of those times. By August of 1914, war had begun in Europe and was threatening to become a world war. Congress quickly took action to provide for needed national military resources and allowed DuPont to convert and expand its "Hopewell Farm" dynamite plant into the world's largest single production plant for nitrocellulose, or gun cotton.

For Chesterfield, Petersburg and Prince George, the odyssey of a new city rising overnight would place the industrial focus for Southside Virginia on DuPont, gun cotton and "the Wonder City." During World War I, the explosive artillery shell was the most deadly weapon, used by the millions. Cannon and howitzers, the grim new machine gun and bolt action rifles, all of which needed gun cotton, would kill millions of men. The expansion took up much of Chesterfield's production of lumber, rail resources, hardware and one fifth of the local work force.

The site selected along the mile-wide James River had excellent railroad links, coastal shipping, and clear and mostly level grounds that needed very little preparation. The needs of the U.S. military and navy and their western allies, Britain, France and Italy, for huge amounts of nitrocellulose (733,380 tons) would reach 40 percent of all the explosives used by the west

during World War I. Among DuPont management, it soon became the "Hopewell Works." With its start on Oct. 27, 1914, Virginia's War Baby was about to roll into high gear.

However, the pressures in post-Civil War America caused great racial tensions and on October 4, an angry crowd became violent and shots were fired. The next day, the A.P. Hill Rifles and Petersburg Guards, both local National Guard units, moved in and a reported 1,000 blacks were forced to move away. Mixed work forces would come in time, but not at the Hopewell Works that fall. By January, 1915, the Petersburg Daily Index reported, "DuPont Powder Works is Very Busy Place Now. Labor is somewhat retarded by mud-Manufacturing will begin February 1st." Construction on 50 homes done and 61 more under construction. Hundreds of carpenters from Chesterfield, Petersburg and Richmond moved into the works daily, and dozens of them were added to the DuPont work force. Almost overnight, a police force, electrical plant, sewerage plant and fire department were in place. From 1,400 to 3,900 workers were in operation, with a local saying, "There are but three kinds of men there, those at work, those coming, those going".

Mud was the great delay in the plant's expansion. Men, horses and wagons made a loblolly of churned soil. Seven smokestacks and 200 chemical tanks were already built. With 31 police officers and two Pinkerton detectives, the law was well established. Payrolls of \$50,000 were making an impact on Southside Virginia's economics. The paper concluded, "No hard times there: no unemployed-if you do not want work, keep away from DuPont."

By the spring of 1915, more than 5,000 were employed, with many Italians coming in for work. The Italians, it was noted, preferred to live in bunk cars along the railroad, instead of the hundreds of "small frame cottages, for

employees, light wooden affairs, covered with roofing paper, quite comfortable as places of abode." It was also noted in Chesterfield that the Richmond to Petersburg Pike, also known as Jefferson Davis Highway, was in bad shape, with all of its 23 miles needing to be resurfaced. As transportation demands increased, heavy use was taking a toll on local infrastructure.

Twenty more officers had been added to the town's police force. Two water pump plants had been built, one each along the James and the Appomattox Rivers, to provide the huge amounts of fresh water needed for manufacturing, flushing pipes, fire fighting and the growing needs of the community. About 75 to 100 carloads of supplies came in via the Norfolk & Western Railroad, along with 2,000 passengers per day.

In 1914, you could rent one acre of land for \$5.00 per year. By the spring of 1915, the price had reached \$60.00 per year for a 20-square-foot area! Land inflation was more than 1,200 percent by the end of the year. Trouble on the rail lines was increasing. It was noted that a man was ejected from a moving train for not having the fare. The story continued that trainmen blackjacked him on the head and he ran around in circles for a while. He was taken to the Petersburg Hospital for treatment. The "Magic City" grew from nothing to dozens of stores, including a post office, bars, cabarets, brothels, gaming houses and open-air court with roped-off "walls" within 60 days. Muggings, shootings, drunkenness, robberies, brawls, street walkers and pickpockets were all too common, with payoffs, bribes and dirty dealings being part and parcel of the boomtown that was becoming Hopewell. However, dry goods, grocery, ice-cream and soft-drink shops also were a growing part of life in Hopewell. No open saloons were allowed to be built near where "near beer," an early low alcoholic brew, was sold. There were not one, but two "moving picture shows." The Hotel DuPont was queen among buildings, looked at as the most fashionable and stylish place in town. Its \$5 per week rates made it a very well-to-do establishment.

By the fall of 1915, more than 20,000 people lived in Hopewell and DuPont's payroll had reached nearly \$1 million per month. One great concern was the possible outbreak of typhoid among the 500 cottages and hundreds of closely packed buildings. Even the huge efforts made to get fresh water were being tested to the maximum. Trash and filth remained in great heaps and efforts to remove it fell behind as the summer heat came on. The gun cotton production was well under way, and shipments to England and France had begun. Indeed, DuPont gun cotton was said to have been part of the cargo of the R.M.S. Lusitania, sunk by a torpedo fired by German U-boat 20 in 1915.

On Dec. 9, 1915, "the Big Fire" broke out



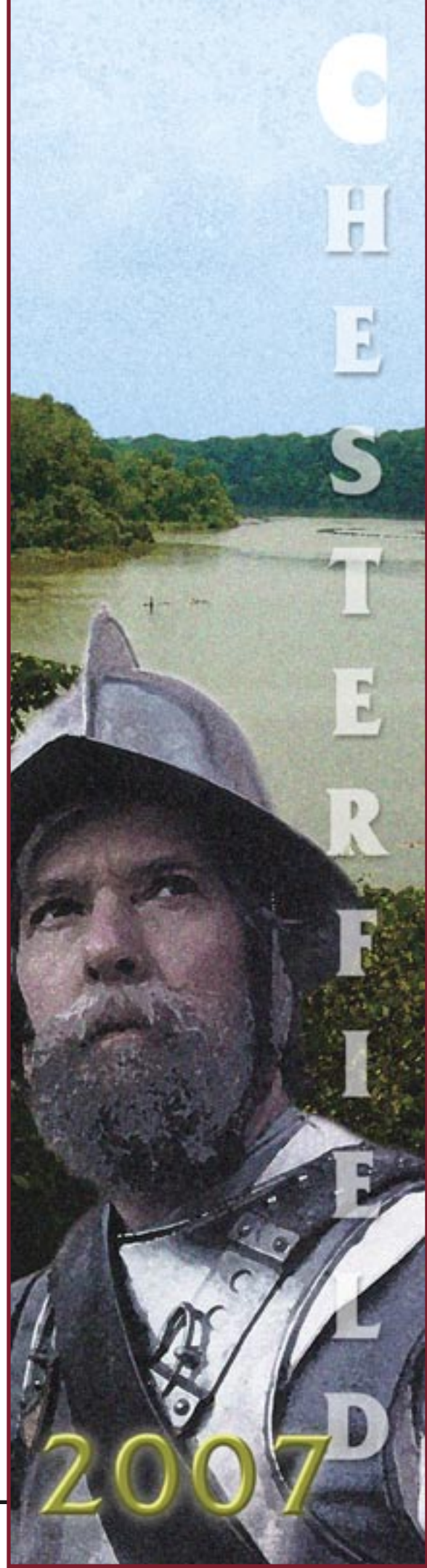
Pioneer Days of Hopewell, Va., Seen by Cartoonist Weinberger

and soon destroyed almost the entire business section of the city. The cost to small businesses with almost no insurance was huge, but from the ashes, a new city was rebuilt almost overnight. By Feb. 26, 1916, Hopewell was incorporated as a city. Nearby Camp Lee (now Fort Lee) was begun in May of 1917 to help train thousands of young Americans, soon to be shipped "over there" to make use of the vast output of the DuPont works. On Farrar's Island (modern Dutch Gap Conversation Area in Chesterfield), an artillery and machine-gun range was established.

By the end of the war, DuPont had produced 733,380 tons of gun cotton. That figure accounts for 40 percent of all military explosives used by the Allies during World War I, including 50 percent of the Republic of France's munitions and nearly 100 percent of the Kingdom of Italy's. In 1916, General Hedlam, chief of the Munitions Board for the British Empire, was quoted as saying, "That DuPont Company is entitled to the credit of saving the British Army." Then, the Great War ended.

From a war-time high of more than 30,000, the City of Hopewell showed only 1,320 people in the 1920 census. In November, 1918, the production of gun cotton ended and the Hopewell Works very quickly closed down. Wooden barges filled with materials were sunk in the James River. A few of these hulks can still be seen today. However, DuPont was not done with Chesterfield, and in 1928, the new DuPont Rayon Plant at Amptill was built, preserving a manufacturing tradition in the county that continues today. ■

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# C H E S T E R F I E L D

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