

## The Allegheny Arsenal Explosion

Pittsburgh will always be known as the Steel City as a consequence of the ubiquitous steel mills, and their barons, which once populated the land. Its strategic location at the crux of three rivers has continually been a natural advantage of this Western Pennsylvania city, with the Ohio River specifically allowing easy access to “all points West.” This is precisely why in 1814, by decree of the U.S. Army, the Allegheny Arsenal was built on about 30 acres of land near the Allegheny River, with the purpose of supplying men and materiel around the country.

During the American Civil War, the quick and consistent manufacturing of cartridges became extremely important. With a dearth of male workers, the U.S. Army recognized an opportunity to tap a new manual labor force in women and young girls. To them, the arsenal was a chance to help their families make ends meet while their husbands, fathers and brothers were away at war. Equally important, it was also a chance for many women to make a patriotic contribution to the Union cause. While the work was repetitive, dirty and dangerous, there was no shortage of volunteers. By September 1862, tension was high in the community, as families had heard rumors for weeks about a possible Confederate attack on Union soil. This was a very real threat to them, and many worried about the possibility of a Southern invasion above the Mason-Dixon Line.

When three explosions rocked the stillness of this Pittsburgh neighborhood on September 17, 1862, the inhabitants had every reason to believe their worst fears, that the Confederates were invading. Little did they know, in the Maryland town of Sharpsburg, the two sides were already set to converge in battle, resulting in the single bloodiest day in American history: the Battle of Antietam. However, there was no Southern invasion of Pittsburgh that afternoon. Appallingly, it was a devastating explosion caused by the era’s disregard for enforcing gun powder safety precautions. The series of explosions caused the roof of the arsenal building to collapse and the structure was engulfed in flames, along with all those in it. The shock of the explosion and intense heat of the fire immediately disintegrated the clothing and flesh of some of the victims, but others were not as lucky; they ran out of the building on fire begging for help from shocked onlookers.

The small community demanded to know the cause behind the deaths of 78 people, mostly women and small children. Was it gross negligence on the part of the management? Was it a lack of attention to detail? Was the building unsafe? These questions swarmed in their minds as burials for the victims, those that could be identified, began. Initially there was the charge of “gross negligence” leveled at the officers in command. However, this was a civilian accusation directed to the U.S. Army. The community could only request that they change their safety practices. The commanding officer of the arsenal, Col. John Symington requested a military inquest as well, and was eventually found to not have acted improperly. To this day there is no official cause for the dreadful explosions. Perhaps it was a spark from a horse’s hoof? Maybe it was the fact that loose gun powder was present on the floors? Or rather, perhaps it was just a case of safety precautions not being followed.

The tragedy of the Allegheny Arsenal deeply affected the Lawrenceville community, but it was overshadowed by horrible loss of life at the Battle of Antietam that same day. It brought the pain and terror of war too close to home for many. It is sadly poignant to note that the cartridges and munitions made at the Allegheny Arsenal by those hardworking laborers were most certainly used in excess at Antietam. After the war, the arsenal was used as a storage facility for the Ordnance Department and Quartermaster Corps before it was abandoned by the U.S. Army in 1926. Today the land formerly occupied by the arsenal contains Arsenal Middle School and Arsenal Park.

There is a plaque commemorating the explosion as well as a monument in nearby Allegheny Cemetery where a mass grave was constructed for the unidentified victims.

Sources:

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