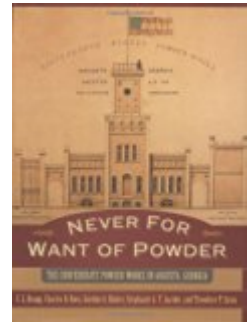


C. L. Bragg, Charles D. Ross, Gordon A. Blaker, Stephanie A. T. Jacobe, Theodore P. Savas. *Never for Want of Powder: The Confederate Powder Works in Augusta, Georgia.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 318 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-657-6.



Reviewed by Mark Wilson

Published on H-CivWar (April, 2008)

This oversize, beautifully illustrated book is more than a coffee-table amusement. A careful study of the Confederacy's main manufactory of gunpowder, it enriches our understanding of the technology of warfare in the nineteenth century. Thanks to its detailed reproductions of primary sources, in addition to the contributions of its original interpretive essays, this book will serve as a valuable resource for scholars seeking to deepen their understanding of the industrial dimension of Civil War history.

This volume is the product of team effort. In the first chapter, C. L. Bragg orients the reader by explaining the crisis in gunpowder supply in 1861 that led the Confederacy to set up public operations to mine niter from Southern caves and build the new manufactory in Augusta. Construction of the manufacturing complex at Augusta began in September 1861; and the facility started producing finished powder in April 1862, just as the Civil War heated up. Later in the book, Bragg provides a series of chapters profiling the facility's architect, engineers, and managers. These pieces complement a pair of earlier chapters by Theodore P.

Savas, which introduce George Washington Rains, a North Carolina native and West Point graduate (class of 1842), who became the man most responsible for the building and management of the Confederate Powder Works. The middle of the book consists of a four-chapter discussion of gunpowder manufacture, written by Charles D. Ross, which describes the production technologies and offers a richly detailed portrait of the facility's wartime output and the recipients of its products. A separate chapter, by Gordon A. Blaker, provides an equally rich discussion of ammunition production at the Government Foundry and Machine Works and the Augusta Arsenal, separate facilities also located in Augusta. One of the book's strengths is the wealth of information it provides about the architecture and construction of the Powder Works. This is the subject of a chapter by Stephanie A. T. Jacobe, in which she describes each of the thirteen buildings on the site. Jacobe's discussion is closely tied to the book's seventy-five color plates, which reproduce a remarkable set of surviving architectural drawings.

The whole book reflects substantial original research in a large number of unique manuscript collections located in half a dozen states, as well as the National Archives. Thanks to the authors' painstaking efforts, we now know a great deal about the design and development of this important war production facility, its output, and the careers of its leaders. Any future study of the Confederate war economy will benefit from the remarkably detailed portrait of the Powder Works, as well as Blaker's account of production at the Augusta Arsenal.

The book is much weaker, unfortunately, when it comes to labor history. Readers get to know the leaders of the Powder Works, but not its workers. We are told in a couple of paragraphs devoted to the subject that for much of the war the facility employed between 100 and 150 men, mostly slaves. The authors miss an important opportunity by failing to do more to discuss these men and their work, a subject that could have filled at least one full chapter. By concentrating on architecture, output, and leadership, the book ends up telling a story that obscures the contributions of common people and the dependence of the Confederate war effort on African American slaves. This approach makes it too easy to overlook the tragic dimensions of the efforts that the book so thoroughly details.

More generally, the book does relatively little to relate the story of the Confederate Powder Works to larger contexts. How did this facility compare to its counterparts in the North or other important Confederate munitions plants? This book does little to answer these questions, in part because it does too little with the available secondary literature. To be sure, the construction of the Augusta facility from scratch in the early months of the war was an impressive achievement. But, it evidently remained smaller and less productive than either of the North's two leading powder suppliers (which were privately owned).

[1] Furthermore, the technological challenges and

economic significance of gunpowder production in the 1860s should not be exaggerated. Certainly, armed forces needed gunpowder. But, weapons and ammunition accounted for a relatively small piece of war economy in the nineteenth century--and required relatively low expenditures and numbers of workers. To understand how the Augusta facilities compared to other important Confederate war plants or fit into the larger war economy in Georgia and the rest of the South, readers will need to turn to other works (many of which are missing from this book's bibliography), including Charles B. Dew's *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works* (1966), Mary A. Decredico's *Patriotism for Profit: Georgia's Urban Entrepreneurs and the Confederate War Effort* (1990), Harold S. Wilson's *Confederate Industry: Manufacturers and Quartermasters in the Civil War* (2002), and Chad Morgan's *Planters' Progress: Modernizing Confederate Georgia* (2005).

In sum, the value of this book derives mainly from its deep, impressively researched portrait of an important Civil War production facility. The authors and publisher should be commended for their research and reproduction efforts, and for offering the book at a reasonable price. We can also thank the Watson-Brown Foundation of Thomson, Georgia, which evidently helped to finance the effort. Anyone interested in Civil War architecture will surely be delighted by this book. General readers will be attracted by its outstanding illustrations, biographical portraits, and clear writing, even if they are sometimes overwhelmed by detail and the need for more contextualization. *Never for Want of Powder* should be received warmly by specialists in the field who will be able to draw on its contributions without losing sight of its limitations.

Note

[1]. See Harold B. Hancock and Norman B. Wilkinson, "A Manufacturer in Wartime: Du Pont, 1860-1865," *Business History Review* 40 (1966):

213-236; and Mark R. Wilson, "Gentlemanly Price-Fixing and Its Limits: Collusion and Competition in the U.S. Explosives Industry during the Civil War Era," *Business History Review* 77 (2003): 207-234.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Mark Wilson. Review of Bragg, C. L.; Ross, Charles D.; Blaker, Gordon A.; Jacobe, Stephanie A. T.; Savas, Theodore P. *Never for Want of Powder: The Confederate Powder Works in Augusta, Georgia*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14401>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.