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LFM: Du Pont's Saltpeter Mission

Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on *A Moment in Time* is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the fall of 1861, Lamot du Pont left on a secret mission. Federal stocks of saltpeter, used in making gunpowder, were running dangerously low.

By the summer of 1861 the both Federal and Confederate leaders realized that the war was going to be a protracted conflict. Alarm began to fixate the planners in the War Department in Washington. Federal stocks of potassium nitrate, known as saltpeter, a substance essential to the manufacture of gunpowder, were evaporating. India, controlled by Great Britain, was the primary source of American supplies of saltpeter. Because the South provided many of the raw materials used in British factories, economic ties between Britain and the Confederacy were unusually strong.

The North had a number of powder mills but the most notable was that of the du Pont clan on the banks of Brandywine Creek near Wilmington, Delaware. With England's sympathy for the South threatening the flow of nitrates destined for Union artillery, the Lincoln administration sent Lamont du Pont to London to buy up all the saltpeter he could find. Within ten days of his arrival in England in November 1861 armed with \$500,000 of US government gold bullion, he had purchased all the saltpeter on the London exchange.

Du Pont had 2,000 tons of saltpeter on the wharves awaiting shipment,

but the British embargoed it in retaliation for the Trent Affair. US Naval blockade ships had stopped and boarded the British mail packet Trent and detained two Confederate diplomats, James Mason and John Slidell. Britain cried foul and demanded their release. Lincoln reluctantly did so, at least in part because of the desperate need for Union saltpeter. On New Years Day 1862 du Pont sailed back to England where, over popular outcry, he was able to persuade Prime Minister Palmerston to authorize the shipment of saltpeter.

The saltpeter which Lammot du Pont brought home lasted the

Union for nearly one year. By the time the stocks ran low again, the prospects for the Confederacy had begun to dim and shipments of saltpeter proceeded without impediment. The emergency further enhanced the value of the du Pont contribution to national security. The family became the primary powder manufacturer for the Union military. They were catapulted into enormous wealth by the war's end and dominated the manufacture of U.S. gunpowder through World War I.

Research assistance by Ann Johnson. At the University of Richmond this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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