



## The Hazard Powder Company

Returning to our series, *Connecticut Industry During Times of War*, I wanted to highlight a company and industry of particular note as we enter the Civil War era. This would be the Hazard Powder Company, a large mill complex formerly located in its namesake, Hazardville, a section of Enfield Connecticut.

The Hazard Powder Company manufactured gunpowder and explosives from the early 19th century to the early 20th century. You would be forgiven for thinking that the company was named due to the hazardous and often very explosive business of manufacturing gunpowder but in fact it was aptly named after its owner: Colonel Augustus George Hazard. A wealthy and politically connected businessman, in 1837 he would go on to acquire a portion of a small gunpowder mill that had been built two years prior in an area then known as Powder Hollow. By 1843, he had dissolved all other partners and became the principal owner. The newly named Hazard Powder Company would be turned into a much larger gunpowder manufactory, coupled with the high demand for gunpowder through the 1840s and 1850s, setting it up to be a million dollar business by the start of the Civil War. Of course, the Civil War would be the biggest boon. Wartime production of gunpowder from Hazard Powder Company would reach 12,500 pounds per day and it's estimated that an astonishing 40% of all the gunpowder used by Union forces was coming from Hazard's company. Some of Hazard's



product would also find its way to the Confederate states. The mill complex spanned over a mile and a half in length with 125 buildings powered by twenty-five water wheels and three steam engines. Rolling mills, granulating mills, screw press buildings, dusting, assorting, mixing, and packing buildings, machine shops, and glazing houses to name a few of the facilities.

Most of these buildings and mills were built in duplicate at a minimum in addition to having operations spread out across multiple buildings so that operations could continue in case tragedy struck. Buildings were constructed with large frames to slow the spread of fire, walls were designed to collapse outward, and blast walls were made to separate buildings in

the hope it would prevent chain reactions if an explosion were to occur. Making gunpowder was dangerous business and explosions were an inevitable and expected occurrence. The gunpowder was made by mixing sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter (Potassium nitrate) together and then grinding this mixture through heavy wheels. Throughout this process, water was used to keep the mixture wet as one small spark from the grinding friction could set it off. The moist mixture was then formed into blocks, chipped into coarse grain of varying sizes, dried, glazed, and then sifted into barrels for transport.

Despite these precautions and many others, such as the use of one-legged stools for workers so that if they fell asleep they are woken up by hitting the floor, no iron tools, and of course no matches or smoking, multiple tragedies befell the Hazard Powder Company. In its 78 years of operation there were 67 deaths with newspapers at the time reporting the gruesome details. A massive chain reaction of explosions destroyed much of the company in 1862, a year into the civil war. A July 25th issue of the Hartford Courant reported that such a loss would not interfere with operations, as there were still 75 mills left on the property. There would be more explosions over the years from before and after the Civil War but this is outside the scope of this short article. Many years after Colonel Hazard's death in 1868, the gunpowder facility would be shuttered for good in 1913 after another massive explosion.

Not much of the Hazard Powder Company remains today. An original horse barn for



the mill still stands. Now called Powder Mill Barn, it hosts weddings and square dancing. If your hobbies include both hiking and history like mine, then you may enjoy heading to the Scitico and Hazardville regions of the Scantic River State Park in Enfield, CT. The remnants of the company can be seen there. Shown in this article is a picture I took of the raceway gates on the dam that held back the Scantic River and supplied power to the mill buildings. The large gear was part of the mechanism that would open a single sluice gate when the river was high. There are many other bits of history that dot this trail and I recommend seeing them and visiting the Enfield Historical Society, where the information for this article was sourced.

*Ryan Elgin serves as EC-CHAP Assistant Director, Curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum, and Volunteer Coordinator. He may be contacted directly at [ryan@ec-chap.org](mailto:ryan@ec-chap.org).*

*The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.*