BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

The Brown's Island Explosion Victims

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1864 reprinting of an 1858 map of Richmond, with Tredegar Iron Works and Brown's Island, marked as "Nellsorts," along the James River | Library of Congress

The worst industrial accident experienced by the Confederacy during the Civil War was the Brown's Island Explosion in March 1863. While the explosion itself is well documented, the details of how the victims were treated, what happened to them afterward, and who they were, are not.

Established in February 1861, the Confederate Laboratory was a large munitions facility on Brown's Island in the James River in Richmond. A newspaper noted that, "The establishment has been of inestimable service, we may say the salvation of the Confederacy. It is the general ordinance manufactory of the South." It was also extremely dangerous.

The laboratory employed about 600 workers, including 300 women and girls. Most made one to two dollars a day, and the vast majority were Irish or German immigrants, people of modest means and little education.

It was a chilly Friday, March 13, 1863. About 60 workers had crowded into a building, with a cluster near a stove at one end of the room. A variety of work was taking place, including breaking open condemned cartridges, sewing linen artillery ammunition bags, packing friction primers, and filling new cartridges. None of these activities should have been done in the same space, and no one without business here should have been in the room.

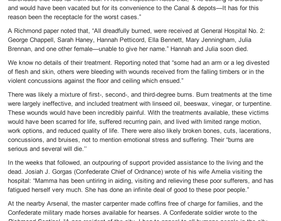
Tredegar Iron Works, with Brown's Island on the left, 1865 | Library of Congress

Nineteen year-old Irish-born Mary Ryan was working with friction primers at the end of a long table. She had previously been corrected for carelessness. Nearby, some teenage boys were loading black powder. Across the room, Mary Cunningham sat by the stove, sewing linen bags. At the other end of the room, several teenage girls were filling new cartridges. Catherine Cavanaugh swept the floor behind Mary. Around the room, boxes of powder, percussion caps, stacks of rifle cartridges, and loose powder scattered about.

Mary Cunningham looked up to see Mary Ryan banging a block of friction primers to loosen them. In an instant a spark was set off, causing two distinct explosions. Ten were instantly killed.

The room was "blown into a complete wreck, the roof lifted off, and the walls dashed out, the ruins falling upon the occupants." Then, "the most heart rendering lamentations and cries . . . from sufferers rendered delirious by fear and terror."

The explosions brought "a tide of people" to help. A newspaper reported that "mothers rushed about, throwing themselves upon the corpses of the dead & the persons of the wounded." Every day for the next 11 days, an injured victim died.



Brown's Island during the Civil War | Library of Congress

Many of the wounded were taken right up the hill to the nearest hospital, General Hospital #2, at the southwest corner of 7th and Cary Streets. This was Bailey's Tobacco Factory, a brick warehouse that was far from ideal. A recent inspection noted that, "The building is unsuitable and would have been vacated but for its convenience to the Canal & depots—it has for this reason been the receptacle for the worst cases."

A Richmond paper noted that, "All dreadfully burned, were received at General Hospital No. 2: George Chappell, Sarah Haney, Hannah Petticord, Ella Bennett, Mary Jenningham, Julia Brennan, and one other female—unable to give her name." Hannah and Julia soon died.

We know no details of their treatment. Reporting noted that "some had an arm or a leg divested of flesh and skin, others were bleeding with wounds received from the falling timbers or in the violent concussions against the floor and ceiling which ensued."

There was likely a mixture of first-, second-, and third-degree burns. Burn treatments at the time were largely ineffective, and included treatment with linseed oil, beeswax, vinegar, or turpentine. These wounds would have been incredibly painful. With the treatments available, these victims would have been scarred for life, suffered recurring pain, and lived with limited range motion, work options, and reduced quality of life. There were also likely broken bones, cuts, lacerations, concussions, and bruises, not to mention emotional stress and suffering. Their "burns are serious and several will die."

In the weeks that followed, an outpouring of support provided assistance to the living and the dead. Josiah J. Gorgas (Confederate Chief of Ordnance) wrote of his wife Amelia visiting the hospital: "Mamma has been untiring in aiding, visiting and relieving these poor sufferers, and has fatigued herself very much. She has done an infinite deal of good to these poor people."

At the nearby Arsenal, the master carpenter made coffins free of charge for families, and the Confederate military made horses available for hearses. A Confederate soldier wrote to the *Richmond Sentinel*, "A non-resident of the city, I beg to appeal to all humane people in the city and the state, to contribute to so laudable a purpose. The poor wounded creatures are young Females who were dependent on their daily labor for their support. I send you five dollars and am only sorry I cannot offer more."

Mayor Joseph Mayo organized a city-wide effort raising money, and churches and the YMCA pitched in. A grand ball was held as a fundraiser. The Ladies Soldiers Aid Society, various hospitals, academies, private corporations, soldiers, arsenal staff, and even the Glee Club donated money, in all netting over $8,000.

The explosion site today | courtesy of the author

Funerals began almost immediately for those who perished. At the same time, the military launched an investigation into the cause of the accident, interviewing the survivors. The next day, March 14, Mary Blessingham and Eliza Willis (the youngest victim at 10 years old) were buried in Hollywood Cemetery. The death toll grew to 29.

Friends May Ryan and Elizabeth Young recuperated at the home of a mutual friend, Emily Timberlake. Mary died here on the 15th, within half a mile of her home. The Timberlake House at 115 East Byrd Street stood until the 1950s when it fell victim to urban renewal. Also on April 15, six victims were buried in Shockoe Cemetery, and the total now stood at 36 dead. The next day four more passed away, as a bad snowstorm struck the city.

On March 17, St. Patrick's Day, Michael Ryan bought a plot in Hollywood Cemetery for his daughter Mary. Two days later, 15-year-old Emma Blankenship died, bringing the total to 42. Injured victims continued to pass away over the next few days, with funerals and burials in the city's cemeteries. March 24 saw Sarah Foster pass away, the last death from the explosion.

The next day authorities released the findings of the investigation: "The opinion of the Board based upon the evidence elicited is that the explosion was caused by the extremely careless handing of Friction Primers by the late Mary Ryan." Gorgas noted, "It is terrible to think of it— that so much suffering should arise from causes possibly within our control."

On March 30 the laboratory called for 200 girls to work, requiring that they must be over age 15, and reopened on April 4, with new safety guidelines. The last victim's body, that of Martha Burnley, was found on April 11 in the canal. She brought the total of dead to 50.

Fifteen of the victims are buried in Hollywood Cemetery. Among them are Mary Ryan, Rev. John Woodcock, Mary Blessingham, Eliza Willis, and Barbara Jackson, who died after "suffering 14 hours." Also resting here are Sarah Marshall, the oldest known victim at 67, with no relations in her plot, and 15-year-old Robert Chappell, who died "after 5 days of terrible suffering." Most of those buried here from the explosion are in plots not owned by their families, and with no other relations in the cemetery.

Graves at Shockoe Cemetery | courtesy of the author

Graves at Hollywood Cemetery | courtesy of the author

In Shockoe Cemetery, 14 are known to be buried. A group was buried here on March 15, in a cluster among soldiers. Here rests Virginia Meyer, 12 years old; 15-year-old Wilhelmena Deffenback; Alice Johnson, who was killed instantly; 12-year-old Margaret Alexander; and 14-year-old Mary Valentine.

There are 19 whose graves are unknown. Martha Daly, age 15, and her sister Ann Daly Dodson, age 18, were both killed—the only pair of sisters lost. Mary Zinghman was killed outright, but her sister Caroline survived. Newspapers noted the discovery of Martha Burnley in the canal, but not where she was buried. There is no record of her family, if she had one, and their relief at finding her body.

Survivors of the incident could have lived until the 1920s or even later. None recorded their stories. No reporters interviewed the survivors: none had their photographs taken. No newspapers, diaries, or journals mention the anniversary of the event on March 13, 1864, or anytime thereafter. No doubt the survivors remembered. What were their feelings? Were some of them working at the laboratory a year later? Did they pause to reflect?