History of the Savannah River Site

Part 1
URS is a global leader in decontamination and decommissioning, and Aiken's hometown Fortune 500 company. Our work closing the Savannah River Site's high-level waste storage tanks built in the 1950s is reducing one of South Carolina's greatest environmental risks.

URS is the only company in the U.S. to successfully close high level waste tanks for the Department of Energy. We are proud to be part of the Savannah River Site history and future.
The urgency with which the Savannah River Project was built in the 1950s and 1960s was directly attributable to the fear generated by the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Secrecy and security were not only encouraged, they were enforced; they became a way of life for the workers at the Plant. We who moved to Aiken because of the SRP did not have conversations around the dinner table at night about what Daddy did all day at work. It was expected and accepted that we did not know or understand what went on "out there," except that the goal was to build materiel for bombs.

Now that the mission of the Site has changed to more peaceful applications, there is an abundance of information available that was lacking in the early days of the SRP. Aiken now has a number of residents who have never been associated with the Site in any way, or whose exposure to it was limited. For them, and for those of us who never really knew what our Daddies did, BELLA feels that it's time to publish a user-friendly history of this incredibly complicated project.

Beginning with the September issue and ending with the December issue, BELLA will publish a series of four supplements to the regular magazine about the history of the Savannah River Project from its inception to present day. Inside this insert are featured the history of atomic energy development, what Aiken was like in 1950, the announcement of the coming Plant, the disappearance of six towns and surrounding farmland to make way for the construction, and a very brief history of the DuPont Company. Next month BELLA will cover the construction of the SRP and the social impact of all the changes it brought to this area.

We at BELLA hope that you enjoy reading The History of the Savannah River Project.

Kathy Huff, Editor
Bellem in 1950

[Editor's Note: To understand the impact of the coming of the Savannah River Project, it is necessary to understand Aiken at the time of the announcement that the Savannah River Plant would be built.]

Aiken was an interesting Southern town long before Woodside and Houndslake Country Clubs were developed, before Crosland Park and Aiken Estates were built, before Owens-Corning Fiberglas and Kimberly-Clark began their operations, and before the

**Population: 7,083**

The mayor in 1950 was H. Odell Weeks, who could not have imagined the role he would play in guiding the city in his 40-year career. There was no professional city manager or city engineer to work with him in 1950. (A city manager would arrive by early 1955.) Others serving the city's 7,083 citizens (53,137 in the county) were members of the Aiken City Council, including Dr. Herman Blake, Charles Jones and Herman Lybrand.

Modern healthcare in 1950s Aiken included the Aiken County Hospital which upon completion of its new wing, would increase the 70-bed hospital by an additional 50 beds. The hospital was a member of the South Carolina Hospital Association, the American Hospital Association and a member of the American College of Surgeons. The Chief of Staff was Dr. Thomas G. Brooks. Healthcare had come a long way since Aiken's first local hospital opened in 1917. It was known as the Aiken Hospital and Relief Society and was built with funds contributed mostly by the Winter Colony.

**Some Winter Colony Still Present**

Even in 1950, some members of the Winter Colony—whose Golden Era began in the 1890s when Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hitchcock promoted Aiken as a sports center to their New York friends—still maintained a presence in Aiken. “News of Aiken Winter Colony” appeared as a column in the local paper and in January reported: “Ten Argentine Polo ponies arrived by plane yesterday. Six were purchased by Pete Bostwick, and four by Alan Corey.”

Not only were their activities noted, but according to Kay Lawrence in Heroes, Horses, and High Society, “The butlers and housekeepers for the big estates always came South well in advance of their employers, and they were that on January 1950, the local paper noted: “A race horse who might have been one of the greatest yet was buried here last Friday. Blue Peter died Thursday of an intestinal disorder. He was laid to rest in the infield of the Training Track, under a large oak tree.”

The ‘Aiken Horse Trials’ drew gubernatorial candidate, James F. Byrnes, to Aiken in 1950. “He presented the City of Aiken Cup at the Aiken Horse Trials with 4,000 in attendance,” reported the Aiken Standard and Review.

**Aiken as an Ideal Resort**

This focus on equine activities enhanced Aiken’s national reputation as was reported in February: “The area of Aiken has been selected as an ideal ‘resort for relaxation’ in the March Esquire’s eight-page supplement, ‘The Art of Relaxation.’ The article is devoted to the U.S. and salutes Aiken for relaxing opportunities of golfing, fishing and spectacular sports.” In addition to the economic support of the Winter Colony, city businesses also depended on the farmers surrounding Aiken, of which there were many—168 farmers attended the Agricultural Outlook meeting in January.

A study by the League of Women Voters of Aiken in the 1950 Aiken County, SC and Foreign Trade saluted cotton as one of the most important farming crops in the county. “It is around cotton that most of Aiken County revolves,” the study stated. “Cotton seed production, fertilizer, cotton sale, weaving, finishing

![1952 Map of Aiken city limits (Courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Museum)](image)

![East side of Main (Laurens) Street between Richland and Park about 1948. (Photo Courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Museum)](image)

![Thomas Laundry and Dry Cleaning and Efron Garage on north end of Laurens about 1948. (Photo courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Museum)](image)
and garment making from seed to shirt, cotton still dominates."

The Aiken Merchants Association sought to stimulate business and attract more people to Aiken, highlighting cotton as their drawing card. They devised the Aiken Cotton Festival that continued from 1948-1956. Events in 1950 included the Cotton Ball, barbecues, exhibits and a parade with $300 awarded to the best float. Some floats portrayed the growth of cotton and corn, one with an emphasis on "liquid corn." Many of the parade beauties carried cotton bouquets.

Local and Family-Owned Businesses

In January, downtown stores began closing every Wednesday at 1 p.m., in a decision reached by the Aiken Merchants Association.

There were many small businesses at that time, some family-owned that had been operating for years.

The Holleys owned and operated the Commercial Hotel, Holley Fuel Company, Holley's Hardware, and Holley Motor Co. Stores like Julia's, Frantzblau's Hardware, B.M. Surasky's Store, Laurel's, Rudnick Furniture Co., and Persley's Department Store represented the Jewish merchants.

Other businesses included Durban-Laird's, Inc., Warnekne Cleaners, Coward-Corley Seed Company, R.W. McCreary's Dry Goods Store, W.J. Platt's Drug, B.T. Dycles and Son, Powell Hardware, Thomas Laundry and Dry Cleaning, Maclo 5-10-25 cent store, McCorry's, Hite's Floral, Rogers Tire and Battery Service, Buchanan Home and Auto Supply, Aiken Lumber Co., and numerous car dealerships. In 1950, Belk, then on Laurens Street, sold Winnie Mae frocks for $2.98.

"The Pig" Was Here Then

Myriad grocery stores of the mom and pop variety operated, though a larger one like Hahn and Company was also still in business in 1950 on the southwest corner of Laurens and Richland. They operated a wholesale and retail grocery, a local wrote of Hahn and Company, "and specialized in fancy foods like caviar, imported teas and carried giggles, fat back and field peas, serving both the wealthy and some not so well to do. Many of the winter residents brought French chefs with them, and we learned their needs and kept them supplied."

Other grocery stores included the A&P at 1720 Park Avenue, Streets have been renumbered since 1950) offering Pet Carnation Evaporated Milk, three tall cans for 37 cents, Efron's Super Market, Piggly Wiggly (since 1948), and the Colonial Store. At Edens, locals could purchase brown 'n serve rolls for 17 cents.

Banks were there to help the citizens, businesses and farmers with their financial needs. These included the Aiken Electric Cooperative float in the Aiken Cotton Festival Parade of 1953. (Photo Courtesy of the Aiken County Historical Society) Farmers and Merchants Bank and the Bank of Greenwood. But there were few industries requiring loans as the larger industries like Owens Corning and Bridgestone had not yet located to Aiken.

Industry in Horse Creek Valley

Industry was located in the western section of Aiken County in the Horse Creek Valley. (Some thought the Cotton Festival had been introduced to "induce the Valley trade to 'Shop to Shop Aiken First.") William Gregg had established the Graniteville Company and utilized "the cotton, the fine climate, and the water power found there." On May 5 of 1930, the new Gregg Dyeing and Finishing Plant in Graniteville was introduced. At that time, the Graniteville Company was "makers of cotton cloth since 1845, with plants in Graniteville, Vaucluse and Warrenville."

Another industry, one of the oldest in the county, was kaolin mining. It was reported that Josiah Wedgwood ordered Aiken kaolin shipped to England for use in the manufacture of his early Wedgwood china. In 1950, companies like J.M. Huber and Southeastern Clay Co. were operating in the kaolin business here.

 Also important to Aiken citizens was their patriotism. There was constant reporting of youths enlisting in the military. Poppy Day was observed, and there was membership support of the American Legion Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion Auxiliary.

Saints and Sinners

Both saints and sinners were given space in the local paper where articles appeared: "A 75-gallon still was destroyed in the Hollow Creek section" and "A resident was arrested for having several gallons of bootleg whiskey." Also, "32 are Baptized at the First Baptist Church" and "World Day of Prayer Will Be Observed."

Numerous churches of various denominations could be found throughout the city and county affording opportunities for both races to worship. Churches included First Baptist Church (1800s) for white worshippers and Second Baptist Church (1900s) for blacks.

Visitors to Aiken could stay at the Commercial Hotel, purchased by the Holley family in 1929, at the Henderson Hotel, where many incoming DuPonters would soon make their temporary homes, or the Parkview Hotel, on the corner of Park Avenue and Chesterfield Street. The Wilcox had welcomed over the years famous visitors including Mr. and Mrs. John Jacob Astor and Winston Churchill. As late as 1954, it was the scene of a banquet honoring James F. Byrnes at the end of his term as South Carolina's Governor. Scott's Lake, operated by the Mackey Scott Sr. family, offered swimming opportunities, while other Aikenites enjoyed movies at the Patricia or the Rosemary theaters featuring heartthrobs like Tyrone Power and Lana Turner. Still others attended piano concerts sponsored by the Aiken Community Concert Association or danced at the annual St. Patrick's Ball.

Those with shared interests joined any one of the numerous clubs or organizations found in Aiken. They included the Masons, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the Pilot Club, Lions Club, 4-H clubs, the Student Club and Junior Student Club, and many garden clubs. Rotary members listened to presentations that reflected topics still current today, such as socialized medicine.

Schools, Public and Private

Mr. A.J. Rutland was the Aiken County Superintendent of Education in 1930, and in November, the Aiken County School population had more than 10,000 students. There were private and public schools, and schools for blacks and whites, as this was before integration. Private schools included the Catholic Saint Angela Academy, established in 1900. Aiken Day School, founded in the early 1930s, and Aiken Preparatory School, founded by Mrs. Thomas Hitchcock in 1916. Some black students attended Aiken Graded School, a Rosenwald School, and Martha Schofield opened and ran a colored (sic) industrial school called the Schofield Normal and Industrial School. This private school was made a part of the Aiken County School system in the early 1950s.

Aiken High School sat where Trinity Lutheran is located on Laurens Street today. The Aiken High athletes performed at Eustis Park, a section of the 100-acre tract of land donated to the city of Aiken by the Eustis family, where Helping Hands is today. (The city also used Eustis Park for sports and activities.) Aiken High moved to its current location on Rutland Drive in 1945, relocating to what was the farm of Mr. Mert George.

Spare Traffic on Whiskey Road

One local resident remembers that the Whiskey Road traffic on Aiken's Southside was sparse in 1950. She also remembers that there were only five or six families living beyond the southern edge of the Palmetto Golf Club, families who owned farms and dairies and large pieces of property. That area, like the rest of Aiken, would soon change.

The Aiken of 1950 was a small, Southern town. It embraced businesses, schools, healthcare, farms, churches, patriots, sports, a library, a post office, entertainment—there were gentile Southern ways and productive moonshiners.

For over a century, the citizens of Aiken had been absorbing newcomers and the changes they brought. On the morning of November 29, 1950, they awoke and discovered that in order to survive this next wave of change, they were going to have to reach deep into their reservoirs of Southern hospitality.
The news fell on Aiken and surrounding areas just like a bomb. Geographically, parts of Aiken, Barnwell, and Allendale Counties were ideal for a new government facility required for national defense, a massive construction project to be called the Savannah River Plant. It was all over the radio that day and in the papers the next day. But on November 28, 1950, no one yet fully understood what it meant. What led to this momentous announcement?

The World Had Become a Scary Place

Events following the Soviet Union’s surprise explosion of an atomic bomb in August 1949 moved quickly in the still top-secret, military-industrial alliance that had formed during World War II. President Harry S. Truman feared the rise of the aggressive Russians. He felt that only a massive American arsenal of weaponry—primarily nuclear—could keep the new enemy at bay. This was particularly true when it was learned that a German-born spy had stolen nuclear secrets for the Russians. It was American know-how that had built the first Russian bomb.

The world’s political atmosphere had changed since World War II. Communists now ruled in China, a broken Europe was recovering slowly, and the Soviet blockade in Berlin violated America’s idea of freedom, the mission behind the country’s participation in World War II. The “cold peace” was not strictly peaceful, it held provocations and casualties and was not without its military clashes, some sustained. (The fighting in Korea was labeled a “police action,” not a war.) The government’s widespread wartime network of atomic energy research and development plants—Hanford, Washington; Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Argonne National Laboratory outside Chicago, and Los Alamos, New Mexico—had each served a purpose in the creation of the “Little Boy” atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, and “Fat Man,” the second bomb, dropped on Nagasaki in August of 1945. Their deployment ended World War II.

The Goal: Tritium and Deuterium

Nuclear science had greatly advanced in the three years (1942-45) of research and development of atomic energy. The new direction in energy research was now in the line of fusion, not fission—or enlarging the atom to release energy instead of splitting it. None of the wartime plants were capable of safe, quick manufacturing of the two key elements of a hydrogen bomb: tritium and deuterium, or heavy water. A new facility, with state-of-the-art equipment, would have to be built.

Having set its course, the government shopped around for a contractor. In contention were numerous huge American chemical companies, but none had the experience of the government’s wartime partner at Hanford’s facilities, E. I. du Pont. With reluctance, but a sense of obligation in continuing its patriotic responsibility to the country’s security and safety, DuPont accepted the charge of building and managing the massive project to continue nuclear research and manufacture the tritium and deuterium.

The Statistics Were Mind Boggling

The idea of the new nuclear facility was overwhelming. 250,000 acres, or 300 square miles would be acquired and the residents of six towns would be relocated to make room for the plant, by purchase or by right of eminent domain. Thousands of workers. Thousands of jobs. All to build atomic bombs. And all being done in the name of patriotism, to keep our country strong and safe, a calculated bet against a future, undeclared war. Local residents could hardly comprehend the news. They just knew one thing: Big change was coming.
The “Other” Letter

Even Napoleon played a part in the path to nuclear power

by Kathy Huff

The atomic bombs that ended World War II were the result of a concerted effort by the U.S. Government to develop nuclear weapons before our enemies did. In hindsight, it is remarkable that such an achievement was orchestrated in only three short years.

During the 1930s, the United States had no government program to address atomic energy; work on the subject was being performed by scientists in independent labs. Americans fiercely wanted to stay out of Europe’s heightening hostilities, believing that isolationist and neutrality policies would protect them from involvement in another foreign war.

The Atom, Explored

Yet in the world of science, breakthroughs in studying the smallest particle of the universe, the atom, would lead to changes unimaginable before the 20th century. James Chadwick’s discovery of the neutron in 1932 ushered in the true beginning of modern physics, and the published papers of independent scientists around the world were advancing research in the field of atomic energy.

All through the 1930s, America’s scientific community was swelled by the influx of European physicists, particularly German physicists—more than 100 fled Nazi Germany because of the violent anti-Semitic policies of Hitler’s administration. Among them was Leo Szilard, a physicist who had originally conceived the cyclotron as a means of achieving fission of the atom, thereby releasing energy; and in 1933 had envisioned a nuclear chain reaction as a possibility if the right element could be found.

Hitler Tips His Hand

By the end of the 1930s, fission knowledge was about equal in the countries of Germany, Great Britain and the United States. At the time, Czechoslovakia was the chief exporter of uranium ore, but those deposits had been under German control since Hitler’s takeover of the Sudetenland in 1938. When Germany stopped all exports of uranium ore to other countries, Szilard was alarmed to the possibility that Germany might hold the upper hand in atomic research. He knew that a weapon using atomic energy could bring about mass destruction.

Belgium was the only other country with a known stockpile of uranium ore, and Szilard believed that the Belgian government should be contacted and urged not to export the ore to Germany. But how could he, a relative unknown, contact the Belgian government, and more importantly, be heeded?

Let’s Talk to Albert

Szilard’s answer: Albert Einstein. At the time, Einstein was one of the most famous people in the world, as popular as many celebrities. His iconic dishevelment and easy manner endeared him to the public, and the scientific community revered him because of his brilliance in physics. Szilard knew that Einstein was friends with the queen of Belgium and sometimes had played violin to her piano. Perhaps Einstein could write a convincing letter to the queen. Szilard and Eugene Wigner tracked down Einstein at a Long Island beach home where they brought him up to date on atomic research developments. Einstein, another scientist self-exiled from Germany, immediately grasped the importance of the request. Einstein decided a letter to the Belgian ambassador would be more advantageous. He also wrote a duplicate to the State Department to dispel any notion of behind-the-scenes military meddling.

Calling on FDR

Several days later, the plan changed dramatically when economist Alexander Sachs learned of the letter from Szilard and offered to take a second letter from Einstein to President Roosevelt, to whom he was an unofficial advisor. Before Sachs could keep his appointment, Hitler marched on Poland, and World War II was launched. It was weeks before Sachs could talk to the president, and then the appointment did not go well, the President being distracted and impatient. Afterwards, Sachs was distraught, sleepless, and intent on a second interview to capture the President’s attention for the desired results.

A moment of inspiration propelled him to the White House the next morning, where FDR was in a better mood. The previous day Sachs had used two glasses to be poured. “Alex, what you are after is to see that the Nazis don’t blow us up?” FDR asked. “Precisely,” Sachs replied.

Government Work Begins

The upshot was the founding of the Advisory Committee on Uranium. Little was accomplished in the first two years other than its being incorporated into the National Defense Research Council, charged with overseeing and coordinating military and civilian scientific work in the event of American entry into the war in Europe. At the time, the U.S. military was underfunded and held hostage by a strong pacifist movement; it was ranked 17th in the world. All that changed with Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt accelerated the program and assigned it to the military. The Manhattan Project was born.

Appointed by the government to oversee the top secret project, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer set up a lab in 1942 at Los Alamos, New Mexico, and set about gathering “the greatest collection of eggheads ever,” according to Manhattan Project chief General Leslie Groves. Einstein was not recruited.

(Continued on next page)
FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover considered him a security risk and would not approve his participation. Secrecy was the byword at places like Hanford, Washington and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Los Alamos, New Mexico, where the government built towns to support the wartime nuclear research employees. Security was tight. It was surmised that German spies might kidnap the scientists building the next generation of war weapons. They needn’t have worried. By 1944, Allied forces in Europe were successful in reaching the German border. In Strasbourg they discovered documents of the Nazi atom bomb project, and concluded that the Germans were at least two years behind the Americans in atom bomb development.

The Bombs Are Dropped

FDR’s death on April 12, 1945, raised Harry S. Truman to the presidency, but it was 13 days into his term before he was apprised of the existence of the Manhattan Project. Three months later, the first atomic device was tested at Alamogordo, New Mexico. It weighed five tons, had a football-size core of plutonium, and achieved a temperature at the blasting site equal to that on the surface of the sun.

For some, the successful test brought about a wave of remorse and for most, ceaseless questions about the morality of the bomb. Stricken with doubts, Leo Szilard met with presidential aide James F. “Jimmy” Byrnes—former U.S. Representative, U.S. Senator, and married to Maude Bush of Aiken, and future governor of South Carolina—to make a case against using the bomb, arguing that it would change the balance of power in irreversible ways. “Perhaps the greatest immediate danger which faces us,” said Szilard, “is the probability that our demonstration of atomic bombs will precipitate a race in the production of these devices between the United States and Russia.” Byrnes in turn argued that Congress needed to show something for the huge expenditures devoted to the project.

Victory in Europe—V-E Day—was celebrated on May 8, 1945, but thousands of American troops were still dying in the Pacific theater. Truman opted to use the bomb to hasten the end of war. The first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, and the second bomb hit Nagasaki on August 9. The Japanese surrendered on August 10. World War II was over. Warfare had been forever changed. The threat of nuclear weapons created an uneasiness in the world that is still felt today. In the words of American radio journalist Edward R. Murrow, shortly after the Hiroshima bombing, “Seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured.”

From Reluctant Participant to World Leader

As a consequence of its sole ownership of the most powerful force on the planet, America could not retreat to its former isolated status. By default or choice, the United States of America became the leader of the world. Until 1949, it was the only nation with nuclear bomb manufacturing capabilities. But on August 29, when the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, an arms race escalated the stakes of the Cold War. No longer confident in the number of atomic bombs in the American arsenal, President Truman set in motion a program to build a new nuclear facility to produce the components of a hydrogen bomb, the next generation of weaponry.

The first spade to build the Savannah River Plant turned dirt in February 1951.

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BRAVO!

To all who contributed to the success of the Savannah River Site.
by Susan Elder

Six Small SC Towns Became Government Property

By the spring of 1952, the citizens of the small South Carolina town of Ellenton must have felt as if they’d become characters in a movie—a science fiction movie, not unlike *The Day the Earth Stood Still* which had premiered the previous September. In the movie, extraterrestrials invaded earth, destroying all weapons in the name of peace. Only here in Ellenton, it was their homes that were destroyed, though the explanation for the destruction was the same.

The anticipation was almost visible in the streets and homes and shops and churches of the town by the afternoon of November 27, 1950. Strangers, a rarity in this town of less than 800 residents, were everywhere, carrying notebooks and measuring equipment. Perhaps some new business would follow them. A small industry would be a blessing in this lagging agricultural economy.

**A Quarter Million Acres Required**

Finally, on the morning of November 28, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, the word came. The E.I. du Pont de Nemours Company, at the behest of President Harry Truman, would design, build and operate a new production plant to be located in Aiken and Barnwell counties, South Carolina, near the Savannah River. About 250,000 acres would be acquired for the site to be known as the Savannah River Plant.

This facility, like existing facilities in other parts of the country, would provide materials which could be used for weapons or for fuels potentially useful for power purposes.

A search team had scanned more than a hundred possible sites, and after reducing the options to three—the others were in Lake Superior and on the Red River in Texas—this area on the Savannah River had best met the criteria. It had a large land area with terrain, geology, and climate good for fast construction. It had a good flow of water for cooling and from which heavy water could be extracted, and it had good transportation. The final decisive factor was that it was an area from which it would be necessary to remove a relatively small number of inhabitants. Removal of a small number of residents sounded simple, unless you happened to be one of those residents.

New Ellenton resident Louise Cassels chronicled her time during the mass departure in a book titled “Unexpected Exodus.” Present at the first meeting in Ellenton’s school auditorium on December 6, 1950, she realized that there could be hard times ahead for herself and her neighbors. Though some looked on the move as an opportunity, others had generations invested in the land and would need a “deep well of patriotism” to help them move forward— that and a sense that they received “just compensation” for their property.

**1500 Families Had to Move**

To make room for the facility and to create a safety zone around it, 1500 families would need to relocate in the next 18 months. Dunbarton, another incorporated community only half as large as Ellenton, would also be moved, as would the unincorporated communities of Hawthorne, Meyers Mill, Robbins, and Leigh.

Cotton gins and saw mills, schools and churches, city halls and railway stations, and one box factory, the structures and the people who inhabited them all had to go— one way or another. Even the dead would have to be relocated. One hundred twenty-six cemeteries would be removed and nearly 6,000 graves transported outside the project area.

There were 46 commercial businesses and 225 residences in Ellenton and Dunbarton, five businesses and 62 residences in Meyers Mill and Leigh combined. The initial estimate indicated that there were about 2,300 farms in the proposed area. The larger farms were sharecropped or rented to tenant farmers. The final acquisition would affect up to 6,500 to 8,000 farmers, the majority of whom were African-American.

**When and If to Plant?**

Farmers could have greater problems even than homeowners, especially those farmers who had large, diversified farms. It would be nearly impossible to find and replace the land and the laborers they depended on. All farm owners had the added problem of not knowing when the government was going to purchase their land. Should they plant another crop? Assuming they could find another farm, could they purchase it and get moved in time to plant for the next season?

**Purchase or Eminent Domain**

The program was set to begin the day after the announcement. The government would acquire the property by purchase or, if necessary, by eminent domain. However it was acquired, all necessary land would become the property of the United States Government by June 30, 1952.

The South Atlantic Real Estate Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) conducted the acquisition program and hired experienced local appraisers to determine a “fair market value” of property to be bought. These men prepared the first appraisal, considering buildings, timber and soil on each tract. The appraisal was approved, the matter reviewed and checked by the COE. Once the appraisal was approved, the matter was turned over to the U.S. Department of Interior.
of Justice which would approach the owner with the appraisal and legal documents. If both parties agreed, an option contract was signed. Any improvements on the property that the owner wished to keep, he could reserve at salvage value. If the former owner did not want the improvements, they could be sold to someone else. The government hoped to make around $50,000 from salvage sales.

Property owners who wished to contest the offered appraisal value had several options. The Real Estate Office could ask the Federal Court to decide what the property was worth in a condemnation proceeding. The appraised value was deposited with the court so the owners with clear title to the tracts would have access to 80 to 90 percent of the funds in order to find another place to live or farm while the courts decided what to do.

The owner was entitled to a jury trial, though the jury option was later replaced by a panel of three judges who would go directly to the land in question. If the land was needed immediately for the first phase of construction, it was obtained through a “declaration of taking,” which uses the government’s power of eminent domain to confiscate the property after paying for it.

**Some Contested the Appraisals**

With the support of State Senator Dorsey K. Lybrand and Representative John J. Riley, an act was passed that insured property owners be paid the full replacement value for their property with a breakdown of the property’s appraised worth. In addition, The House Ways and Means Committee approved a bill that eliminated the capital gains tax clause from the proceeds for seized property that was condemned.

Some displaced residents, at the suggestion of Strom Thurmond, chose to engage an attorney to assist them in their appeals. The former governor had become an Aiken resident in 1950 and practiced law with Charles Simons and Dorsey Lybrand at their office in downtown Aiken. The firm successfully represented the landowners, sometimes doubling the original appraisal offer. Other local attorneys such as Fabian Keirce of Bamberg and Henry Busbee also provided legal advice to project area landowners.

On April 20, 1951, condemnation proceedings began on 22 tracts so that construction could begin. The neatly painted homes were gradually hauled away. Unwanted homes were left for temporary storage. Once well-kept yards and gardens became neglected and weedy, and Ellenton gradually developed a “snaggle-toothed” appearance. As the vacated houses were transported away, 126,000 boxcar loads of building materials arrived. Construction crews and their families began arriving as well, swelling the rolls of churches and schools. By September 30, 1952, nearly 38,580 newcomers had come to the area, many in trailers, scattering over empty property in nearby Jackson and a growing town up the road called New Ellenton. Enormous trailer courts in Aiken and Barnwell filled almost overnight.

**Some Defied Evacuation**

Saturday, March 1, 1952 was designated as Evacuation Day, though a few residents, like Louise Cassels and her sister Mamie, still remained in their homes, awaiting completion of their newly constructed home in Aiken. Power and phone service had been turned off. On April 1, 1952, the sisters left for good.

By May 1954, The Corps of Engineers Aiken office was closed, indicating that the removal and acquisition process was nearly finished. When completed, the COE would have purchased all the land and necessary improvements for $15,382,026. Relocation of highways and major utilities and cemeteries brought the cost of the entire program to $19,000,000.

And so, the Earth had not stood still for those 1500 families dwelling in 1951 on the land around the Savannah River in Aiken, Allendale, and Barnwell Counties in South Carolina. It had moved, more quickly and more drastically than they ever could have imagined, and as Louise Cassels wrote, “Not once did we look back. A new life was ahead; we’d left the old.”

**Sources:** Unexpected Exodus, by Louise Cassels, Sand Hill Press, 1971; Savannah River Site at 50 by the Savannah River Site History Project, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002

Susan Elder is a new contributing writer for Bella Magazine. Her writing credentials include a gardening column which ran for years in The Aiken Standard.

### SRS Public Tour Schedule 2012

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To sign up for a tour, or for more information, visit [http://www.srs.gov/general/tour/public.htm](http://www.srs.gov/general/tour/public.htm)

Those without computer access can call Laurie Posey or Janet Griffin at 803-952-8467 or 803-952-8994.

The 2013 SRS Public Tour Schedule will be published in the December issue of BELLA Magazine.
Change came slowly to their community and that was good enough for some, but for others progress seemed to crawl into their lives. Black and white families worked side by side in Aiken and Barnwell Counties, one predominantly providing the stores and physical securities, while the other supplied the hands to turn the soil in gardens and fields, or able bodies to rake the lawns and clean homes. Neighbors shared each other’s celebrations and tragedies. But these rural folks never predicted their way of life was destined to die.

**Farm Facts**

For African-Americans who had recently become landowners, the 1950 proclamation of the federal “Bomb Plant” property buy-out for relocation brought despair. The news was just as heartbreaking for the tenant and sharecropper, because little help would be offered to help them as they were forced to uproot their homes and livelihood.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers (COE) had estimated land acquisition could displace 8,000 farmers; the majority were black property owners (for whom ownership was on the increase, particularly in Barnwell County), sharecroppers, and tenants. Unfortunately, documentation of African-American families was scant, so the real story of their displacement is not known.

The Site Survey Committee reported that 67% of the area was wooded and 33% was cultivated or pasture land. Farms were one-mule tracts and multi-tractor operations growing peanuts, corn, grains, cotton, watermelon (to ship north), soybeans, seed lupine, and sorghum. Most were small farms, larger ones used a sharecropping or tenant agreement. DuPont studies realized most of the agriculture was worked by African-Americans.

On December 6, 1950 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held a public meeting where representatives from each Army Corps of Engineers held a public meeting where representatives from each

**Humble Hamlet**

Just northwest of what is now New Ellenton lies a small community of African-Americans called “Zion’s Fair.”

Most of the houses in this little village had been moved from the Savannah River Site and placed along White Pond Road just off Highway 19. Their old church building was also relocated and placed on a new foundation. No federal funding was given to help establish this community.

**A Tale of Two Tillers**

According to the Charleston News and Courier, Joseph Alexander Owens was the “largest property holder and most successful colored man in Barnwell County.” He owned no land whatsoever after the Civil War, but by 1881 he had made a name for himself. Owens owned a plantation, two stores, and had a $5000 credit account in Savannah.

In the 1930s another tenant had wanted to become a land owner and farm his own property, so he saved and made his dream a reality in the next decade. In 1948 he took out a mortgage from Dean Rountree, a Dunbarton cotton broker, and bought 172 acres for $4500. Willie Floyd was the first African-American to become a land owner in Barnwell County. He made his payment by giving Rountree a 30% share of his cotton crop. It was a steep price but Willie was determined. Not only did he make the payments, but he also improved his property.

**Rubub and Sure Pop**

The Floyd home got electricity in 1949 with the help of a man named Tink Sanderson who learned wiring during the war. Willie added three new rooms to the back of his house, and he and his wife, Lutiny (Dunbar), filled the kitchen with a woodstove, table and chairs, pie safe, and a sofa and straight-back chairs in the parlor. Iron and wooden beds with straw (and later cotton), chiffarobes, chests of drawers, and chamber pots were added to the bedrooms. Outbuildings dotted the Floyd property: a smokehouse, privy, chicken house, barn, well house, shed, lot and stable. Willie bought groceries from Cassel’s Long Store in Ellenton and farm supplies from Sanders’ Store nearby. The industrious farmer saved enough to buy a car in which he would make trips to Augusta or Barnwell for clothes after the cotton harvest. Medical supplies would also be purchased; Calum and Rubub for annually “cleaning out” the children before school started and Blackdraught (“Sure Pop”) for the mules.

Willie grew cotton, peas, peanuts, and watermelon; he harvested cotton in September. He transported the cotton to a “gin” at Dunbar Station where Rountree would cut open a bale, grab a fistful of fiber, and make an offer. The tireless man raised livestock and grew corn, keeping the end kernels for seed. He planted cow peas between the rows so it could climb the cornstalks, then stored them until a traveling pea thrasher came to town. The Floyd garden grew greens, potatoes, cabbage, peas, okra, squash, beans and onions.

Cows, pigs and chickens lived on his land, and he used a four-mule plow to work his fields. After all his years of tilling the land and raising his livestock, the AEC bought his land for the “Bomb Plant” project. They destroyed all his buildings.

(Continued on next page)
The Other Meyers of Meyers Mill

Ten miles southeast of Ellenton, a small town named Meyers Mill contained a railroad depot, post office, a few stores, a church and a cotton gin. Meyers Mill was an unincorporated town that was to die, displacing another family. Although not farmers, they were people with deep roots in the area. This African-American family shared the Meyers name with the founder of the area, named for the man who operated a grist mill in Barnwell County.

Relocation was heartbreaking for the William Meyers family. William was the son of a white land owner named Duff Meyers and a slave descendant named Tamer. William Meyers married Clarissa Park in 1880 and together they had seven sons and two daughters. Their property can be visited today.

Fallout of ’51

Hoping it would be a window of opportunity and progress for change for the African-American in the South, Director of the Washington Office of the NAACP, Clarence Mitchell wrote, “It is very important that the Federal Government make certain that the racial patterns of the state of South Carolina will not be imposed in the territory which is used for the production of the H bomb.”

A study was made of federal reservations in the area. Camp Gordon, Clark’s Hill Dam, the Augusta Arsenal, and Fort Jackson. The U.S. Defense policy of integration was followed at Camp Gordon and Fort Jackson, and by civilian posts. The irony was that even though the transportation system was integrated at Fort Jackson, the bus system that provided service to and from the post was segregated in accordance to South Carolina custom and laws.

In March of 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) recommended that transportation in the area become integrated, which pitted South Carolina’s labor laws against these propositions. These laws had been mandated while the textile business grew in that state, and segregation was the law. DuPont skirted the issue by building separate toilet facilities but hung no signs saying so over them.

The NAACP accused union leaders of Augusta of not hiring African-Americans at the plant. A few months earlier the American Veterans Committee had issued an announcement stating the Atomic Energy Commission was “outdoing the South in racial discrimination.”

Another irony was that the Ku Klux Klan declared they were being discriminated against also. Thomas Hamilton, KKK grand dragon in South Carolina, vowed to make much ado about his members being denied jobs at the Savannah River Project. The clash with the Klan caused DuPont’s George McMillan to say, “It came as a surprise to many of the Project’s officials that the robed organization is not a legend but a political reality here, and workers with this affiliation have had to be fired.”

The people of Ellenton were dismayed by the rally held by the KKK near the plant in January of 1951. They were earnest about making the closing of their town a peaceful transition and did not want this kind of negative attention in their final days as a community.

President Truman formed the Contracts Compliance Committee to serve as watchdog over federal contracts for racial and religious discrimination. In 1953 the NAACP filed a protest that charged the AEC with discriminated hiring. SRP management fired back a denial of those accusations, saying more than 5,000 African-Americans were currently working at the plant. This statistic quieted the friction for a while, but the debate would be ongoing through most of 1953.

“Make it Better for the Next Generation”

When Shepherd Archie heard the plant was hiring, this African-American didn’t care what job would be assigned to him—he wanted in. His first job was in the old Ellenton schoolhouse that had been converted to offices. He spoke of his employers, “Most of them came up through the segregation world… and we were trying to make it better for our kids by going along (with) whatever they do.”

Blacks weren’t allowed to eat in the cafeteria and “eat like other people” so they ate in a corner instead. Eating their packed lunches, these men kept quiet about the fact they didn’t haverestrooms to wash their hands. Instead, they were happy that when in the field, they could tote 55-gallon drums filled with water to wash their hands. “So we didn’t rebel,” Archie said. “When it did come (desegregation) they integrated the bathrooms— we didn’t just run in there and say, ‘I’m going to take this locker.’ We eased into what locker was available… trying to make it better for the next generation to come. So that was how we worked it.”

Your Job Ain’t Low

Archie and his fellow African-American workers conferred among themselves about ways to become a part of the plant. They wanted to feel that they belonged to the new conglomeration. Archie gave them these wise words: “We might not run the reactors… or the powerhouse, we might not run the administration building, but we repair the roads to get them there… We repair the waterlines… we’re making a big part of it for these people who are running the reactor, because they couldn’t run the reactor if they couldn’t get to it. They couldn’t run the reactor if they didn’t have water. So we’re doing the greater part. Your job ain’t low. Your job is just as big as the man pushing the buttons in the reactors.”

According to Archie, for many of the black men, jobs at the plant meant elevated status from poor to middle class, and a better life. He would do anything they asked him to do at the plant. “I got it did,” he said, “because I had good peoples, and the onliest way to work with good peoples is to be good to them.”

Archie decided that when he was in charge of assigning crews, he would integrate them “I missed them.” He discovered this produced better safety practices and production because the workers competed. They could concentrate on the job since they had “nothing in common last night. Their wives didn’t go out to eat together. They ain’t got nothing to hide from each other… the only thing in common is their safety and their job.”

Because pay at the plant was good, Archie observed that outside employers had to raise their workers’ pay if they wanted to keep them. Even the police department was losing employees that resigned to work as security at the plant. This hard-working man believed the SRP brought many good things to the area.

Where are they now?

What happened to the African-American farmers and families that were displaced by the Bomb Plant? Unfortunately records of their migration are scant or nonexistent. Ancestors have to rely on stories handed down by mouth, and many simply reach dead-ends when trying to trace their family roots.

The arrival of the Savannah River Project was a change that raised the caliber of living for some. But for others it destroyed homesteads steeped in family history. Distraction erased dreams for the future, leaving only memories and whispers of the past to recall the towns and places that are no more.
By Phyllis Maclay

The Ellenton Exile

Apparently there is nothing that cannot happen today.

— Mark Twain

They were hermits, the country man and his sister. They didn’t possess much but what they had would not be seized by the government. So when the dozers and backhoes rumbled onto their property, the landowner clutched his shot gun and held the contractors at bay. It didn’t matter to him the new bomb plant needed his land for its entrance. It wasn’t important he was throwing a wrench in their timetable. The determined man dug in his heels and stopped the construction—or destruction, depending how you looked at it—for a few days. But he was just one man and soon they dragged him and sis away to an asylum. His frontage was seized and the rearranging of the landscape began outside Jackson and over all of Ellenton.

A Way of Life Destroyed

James Dunbar Jr. donated a chunk of land on his plantation to be made into streets surrounding the expanding Port Royal Railroad. The railroad superintendent named the area “Ellen’s Town” after Dunbar’s daughter, and farmers planted roots there while stores, churches, and residents popped up. The village’s name evolved to “Ellenton” and grew rapidly, with Dunbar becoming the first postmaster. Wealthy families built homes inside town limits, attracting more merchants and bringing revenue to Ellenton.

By 1950 Ellenton had about 760 people in 190 residences with 30 commercial buildings, schools, churches, City Hall, the train depot, a jail and a cotton gin. Crops had been planted in the fields and women made plans for stuffing turkeys and baking pies and cakes for the holiday feast. But the day after Thanksgiving the announcement about nearby construction of a Federal “bomb plant” exploded upon the stunned community. Residents huddled around the wood stove in Cassels Store listening to the radio, trying to wrap their minds around the fact that they had to move. Releases in the newspaper read: “It will be necessary for about 1,500 families to relocate in the next 18 months. The Federal-State agricultural agencies are organizing to give help to the families who must relocate.”

A total of 6,000 homes were “sold” to the government for what was promised to be fair prices. But Cecil Greene, life-long resident of Jackson, disagrees with the government’s idea of what was fair. His family farmed 900 acres near Jackson. The Federal government seized 800 of them, paying his father only $40 an acre.

“It destroyed a way of life,” Cecil said. “The land was in our family for four generations.” His father was postmaster of Jackson and didn’t feel that he could join others in suing the government for whom he worked for more money. “My father had just planted corn in the fall of ’30,” he said. “They let him cut it. Said he had one year.”

No Martians Here

Cecil’s wife, Betty (Youmans), also felt the grief of losing her hometown and family property for the plant. After her father’s death in 1946, Betty’s mother rented out their farm and settled in town. Betty was a carefree high school senior when the 1950 land seizure took their 1600 acres and their legacy, leaving only recollections of her beloved town to comfort her.

“Our was the last graduating class at Ellenton,” she said. Betty recalled memories of dances in the school gym, a class trip to Washington DC and living in a small town where neighbors cared for each other.

Almost overnight Ellenton became the hot spot for the curious to cruise the streets to see what a town about to deleted from the map looked like. “They looked at us like we were from Mars,” remarked Betty. “It was the beginning of the end for Ellenton, a town with its own ideas about the way life ought to be.

Blue Goose and a Train Named Fido

Ellenton had unique and whimsical characteristics—like a train the locals called Fido that often hauled asparagus to Beaufort. The Blue Goose was a well-liked eatery and popular haunt. Many vendors catered to Ellenton: Cassels Store (also called the Long Store) along with Sanders and Brinkley’s stores. Shop owner Jean Shaw, a quirky vendor who rarely wore a dress, didn’t mind hauling heavy cartons through her store or carting crates of merchandise down the aisles. An ambitious, resourceful woman, Shaw knew the location of her store near the movie theater was good for business. She ran a small pool hall which served burgers and soft drinks, providing a place for people to hang out.

The Sack Theater

Ellenton resident, Mr. O’Berry, saw the need for a movie theater, so he nailed chicken wire to two-by-fours, then covered them with burlap sacks to block the view of the movie screen from passing people. With no ceiling or roof, movies were shown only at night. Folks christened it “The Sack Theater.” Word came later that an available building near Shaw’s Store would better serve the patrons, so the theater was moved indoors. Still the segregated South, tickets were sold in two separate lines at the window according to color, and a divider was put in the middle of the seats.

Passage and Peace

After graduation Betty moved to Columbia with her mother and attended college while Cecil went to Clemson University. He married Betty in February of 1955, then was off in the Army that March. He kidded that it was the best two years of Betty’s life. “She got to swim in the officers’ pool,” he laughed.

Cecil’s father became the busy postmaster of Jackson selling lots of money orders since there was no depository there and Ellenton’s had been dissolved. “He sent many orders to Tennessee, Alabama, and North Carolina,” recalled Cecil.

Betty is now president of the Ellenton Reunion and is busy keeping track of all former Ellenton residents and making plans for their annual gatherings. “It’s what she lives for,” mused Cecil. Betty has filled many albums with nostalgic photos of the people and places in Ellenton.

“We’ve Done All Right”

It was a deep loss for the Greenes and many other residents who were sent into exile by the arrival of the Savannah River Plant. “I’m not bitter,” said Betty. “I don’t hold a grudge. I have wonderful friends from Tennessee and Alabama. We have two sons, one daughter, and one son-in-law who all work at the plant. We might have split up and not all been together like we are now. They wouldn’t have all stayed on the farm. We’ve done all right.”

The exodus was 62 years ago. Almost all the displaced landowners are gone. It’s a good thing Betty and her friends are determined to come together to share memories. And to write down history for the rest of us to appreciate what happened to a group of people who gave up their heritage and managed to do all right despite their loss.

Ellenton was officially closed March 1, 1952.

(Continued on next page)
These images are all photos of places or buildings in the six rural towns displaced by the U.S. Government in 1950-51 when land was purchased or taken by right of eminent domain for the construction for the Savannah River Site.
At the age of 14, Eleuthere Irenee DuPont, the youngest son of a Paris watchmaker and political economist, wrote a paper on the manufacture of gunpowder. By the age of 32, he had studied explosives production techniques with Antoine Lavoisier, raised funds from his countrymen, and emigrated to America, where in 1802, he broke ground on the banks of the Brandywine River in Delaware for the first of his powder mills. The DuPont Company was born.

For the next 78 years, black powder was the company’s sole product, and for a time it was also involved in the production of dynamite. At the beginning of the 20th century, under new leadership—still family—the company continued to grow with investments in other industries. Following World War I, DuPont scaled back its munitions business and instead began to emphasize the development of materials science, incorporating elements of applied physics and chemistry.

In 1927, Dr. Wallace Carothers was lured away from Harvard with the promise that he could pursue basic research, particularly in the area of polymers. Neoprene, the first synthetic rubber, nylon and Teflon were a few of DuPont’s introductions in this area. DuPont soon developed a reputation for organizational strength and design and engineering capabilities. With its history of explosive manufacture and a long association with the military, the company was ideally suited for a new project being developed by the United States Government in 1942—operation of site facilities. At this point, the Savannah River Plant (SRP) became known as the Savannah River Site, or SRS.

Many of the former employees of the centuries-old corporation have continued to work for WSRC and its successor contractors that followed. The ubiquitous DuPont oval gradually faded away, though the men and women who had worn it still sometimes refer to themselves as “DuPonters.” It was a company they were proud of.

**A Culture of Safety**

DuPont emphasized safety as one of its key management pursuits, resulting in one of the best industrial safety records in the world. Workers took the safety message home when they left for the day. In the early days of seatbelts, DuPont employees and their families were easy to spot because they always buckled up. Generous safety prizes were awarded regularly to the entire plant upon the completion of accumulated hours worked without an accident.
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