

# CREATING HANFORD

BY C. MARK SMITH

On a cold, clear day in late December 1942, Colonel Franklin T. “Fritz” Matthias and two engineers from chemical giant DuPont discovered what they had been looking for: a place to build the massive facilities required for a critical part of the Manhattan Project, the American effort to build and deploy an atomic bomb. Matthias and his team explored eleven sites in four western states. The site they chose was a 670-square-mile tract of land—almost half the size of Rhode Island—of semi-desert shrub steppe located at the great horn of the Columbia River in southeastern Washington.

In 1942, about 1,500 people lived in the area on scattered hard-scrabble farms and ranches and in three tiny towns, including White Bluffs, Richland and Hanford. Because the Manhattan Project was of utmost importance, the towns and people were of little concern. The almost unlimited availability of cold water from the Columbia River and vast amounts of electric power from the recently completed Grand Coulee Dam sealed the decision.

They named the facility Hanford Engineer Works (HEW) after the small town of Hanford, population approximately 250. It was top-secret at the time, but HEW was to be a massive manufacturing complex designed to produce a single product—plutonium.

The town was razed to make way for what became the sprawling construction settlement called Hanford Camp. By the end of 1945, the Army, DuPont and 51,000 people had built three nuclear reactors; two chemical separation plants; and 554 other buildings—as well as Richland Village, which housed 16,000 of the workers and their family members.

Seventy-five years ago this past summer, plutonium from Hanford’s historic B Reactor was used to fuel the atomic bomb that was tested at Trinity, New Mexico on July 16, 1945 and then, the “Little Boy” bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

Hanford’s origins date to 1907, when the town was platted by a group of real estate investors led by Manley Bostwick Haynes who first visited the area by row boat in 1890. The group purchased 32,000 acres of land west of the White Bluffs town site. Haynes donated the town site with the provision that it be named for him, but the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul (CM&SP) Railroad, better known by its “Milwaukee Road” nickname, objected. The railroad, which was planning a branch line nearby, already counted Haynes, North Dakota in its service area. The back-up plan was to name the town for Haynes’ well-connected father-in-law, Judge Cornelius H. Hanford of Seattle. Judge Hanford was a former Chief Justice of the Washington Territorial Supreme Court and the first U.S. District Court Judge for Washington.

In 1908, the group formed the Hanford Irrigation and Power Company. They built a concrete pump house—now one of the few remaining pre-HEW buildings—and began to extend electric power and irrigation canals to the surrounding area. Unfortunately, the desert claimed the water in the unlined irrigation canals faster than it could reach its intended customers.

Judge Hanford didn’t fare much better. In 1912, he resigned his office during an impeachment investigation into allegations of habitual drunkenness and accepting financial favors from the Northern Pacific Railroad. Hanford then shifted gears, writing a three-volume history, *Seattle and Environs*, which was published in 1924. Judge Hanford died in 1926 at age 76.



TOP: Nuclear reactors line the riverbank at the Hanford Site along the Columbia River in January 1960. The N Reactor is in the foreground, with the twin KE and KW Reactors in the immediate background. The historic B Reactor, the world’s first plutonium production reactor, is visible in the distance. Courtesy Department of Energy.

BOTTOM: Hanford was a small and remote community when it was depicted on a topographic map in the 1920s. USGS Archives.

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