Railroad at Naval Proving Ground

Above: 6-inch gun mounted on rail car, Indian Head, ca. 1918

Above: Ammunition storage building, Indian Head, ca. 1900

Above: Electric engine transporting a test rocket, Indian Head, ca. 1960

The existing internal railroad system at Indian Head reflects four periods of development: Naval Proving Ground (circa 1900), World War I expansion, World War II expansion, and developments during the 1950s. The designs and materials incorporated into the railroad system evolved over the years, and the use of rails as a method for transporting goods remained advantageous. An internal railroad system provided a safe, cost-efficient, reliable, and effective means to move raw materials and finished products throughout the proving ground.

Naval Proving Ground circa 1900 - The first railroad tracks for Indian Head were laid out during the construction of the proving ground during the early 1890s. The railroad followed a curvilinear design to allow traveling cranes and flat cars to transport materials back and forth. As the proving ground expanded to include the production of smokeless powder, the railroad grew to connect to new areas of use.

World War I - As the United States entered World War I, demands for the production of smokeless powder increased. The boost in production led to construction of additional buildings and warehouses at the proving ground. In 1918, authorization was granted through President Woodrow Wilson's Presidential Proclamation #1458 to add 1,239 acres to the southern tip of Indian Head known as Cornwallis Neck. Additional railroad tracks were laid to connect the new area to the rest of the proving ground. The new tracks followed a linear design rather than the curvilinear design of the original tracks. The linear tracks were preferred because they were easier to maneuver. This configuration also allowed the Navy to orient buildings in a way that would minimize damage in the event of explosion.

World War II and 1950s Development - At the beginning of World War II, Indian Head was one of only two military installations equipped to produce explosives. As a result, Indian Head proved indispensable to the mobilization effort of World War II. The Powder Factory grew to include an Extrusion Plant in 1943, which housed rocket propellant production for small rockets, as well as hundreds of new research and development facilities. The Korean War led to another period of increased activity at Indian Head. Old facilities were reactivated, and new facilities were established. With the increased activity and the addition of new facilities at Indian Head, the need to expand the railroad became a priority. Railroad usage eventually decreased, however, as shipping by truck became more economical. The extensive network of railroad tracks that characterized the Indian Head landscape partially was paved over and new plants relied less on railroad transportation.

Left, Center and Bottom:
Railroad construction at Indian Head, ca. 1919

Indian Head Railroad, ca. 1955

Inset: Indian Head railroad system overlaid on 2009 aerial imagery

INDIAN HEAD RAIL TRAIL

Naval Support Activity SOUTH POTOMAC

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