

2018 marks 100 years since deadly Split Rock explosion

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TOWN OF ONONDAGA, N.Y. (WSYR-TV) - In 1918, a whole different kind of threat ended up leading to one of the single deadliest tragedies in Central New York history-- the explosion at the Split Rock Quarry.

With World War I raging, Split Rock Quarry in the Town of Onondaga was being mined for limestone to be used in munitions by the allies.

When mining moved to Jamesville and the U.S. entered the war, Split Rock became a munitions factory-- one that was locally known, but protected by guards and fences.

On July 2, 1918, a fire broke out at the factory, sending explosion shock waves through the area.

"People were running out of theaters, 'was it an earthquake?', 'was it the Germans attacking?'" recalls Scott Peal, the education coordinator at the Onondaga Historical Association.

Only one of the storehouses of TNT that blew up. Peal says if any more had, "Syracuse would have been blown right off the map."

50 people were ultimately killed-- most dying not from the explosion itself, but from the noxious gas that came from the fire.

A gear overheating and starting the fire in the main TNT building was the official cause, and water pressure issues made it nearly impossible to put it out. Though some conspiracy theorists say the Germans may have been to blame.

The explosion of 1918 wasn't the only one the quarry saw-- five men were killed and several were injured on Feb. 19, 1916 during an explosion.

Ambulances struggled to reach the scene due to blizzard conditions, the Onondaga Historical Association said in a tweet.

Many workers resigned the following day.

The only real marker of the 1918 tragedy--aside from the still-standing rock crusher-- is a giant monument in Oakwood Cemetery.

On either side of the monument is the 35 names of those killed who have been identified.

On the backside is 15 names of men who were killed in the accident whose remains were never identified.

Throughout the year, different events will be planned to mark the 100th anniversary of the explosion.

