



## IRON VALLEY REVISITED: South River, Rockbridge County

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**O**N JUNE 26, 1891, an article by Colonel John C. Shields appeared in the *Buena Vista Advocate* about “The Iron Valley” of Rockbridge County. The name referred to the South River Valley, which is seventeen miles long, extending from near Buena Vista to a few miles north of the Augusta County line, along the western foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. In those mountains are deposits of ore that have been mined since the eighteenth century. Numerous iron works sprang up along the river, and by the 1840s it was known as the Iron Valley.

In addition to the iron ore, the Valley had productive farm land, abundant forests, clay suitable for making bricks, and a promise of tin ore. It was, alas, also susceptible to floods, which at times damaged the iron works. The Hurricane Camille flood of 1969 was the most disastrous of these.

When the railroad came,<sup>1</sup> stations were established to take commercial advantage of these assets. Witness the *Lexington Gazette* of March 1883: “This great Railway strikes Rockbridge just north of the plains of our Vesuvius and in its direction south has crossed one of the watersheds between the James and Potomac rivers [along] a route chosen by Indian trails and blazed by pioneer settlers.”

Vesuvius, **1** the northernmost of the stations in Rockbridge, served an iron works on the west bank of South River, just downstream from the present village. Here were a furnace; a foundry built by Maybury and

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<sup>1</sup> The Shenandoah Valley Railroad, a project promoted and eventually owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad and later by the Norfolk & Western, was built to connect Hagerstown, Maryland, with Roanoke, Virginia. The section passing through Rockbridge hugged the South River and was completed in 1881–82.





The Shenandoah Valley Railroad in its heyday, Cornwall. Photos above and below courtesy of the Rockbridge Historical Society's collections at Washington and Lee University.

and iron ore made the village of Midvale, where eventually a store, a post office and the station could be found. During the Buena Vista boom of the 1890s, there was also a brick manufacturing plant that sold bricks to Buena Vista's developers. Midvale's moment of glory came in 1895, when an ore tramway was put into operation. This was a perfectly straight railroad some 6,000 feet long, rising 1,200 feet up the mountainside. On the track were six cars attached to a cable. Three cars, each loaded with three tons of ore, provided the power to pull up three empty cars. The cars passed each other at automatically operated switches. The operation worked entirely by gravity and promised to deliver 250 tons in a ten-hour period. A feature of pride was the fact that the operators at the bottom communicated with those at the top by telephone.

Where Irish Creek enters South River a lawyer named Crowder built a store that served the Irish Creek Valley as well as the surrounding neighborhood and was quite successful. A post office, probably in the store, was known as Crowder. When the railroad came, the station was naturally called Crowder. At times as many as ten cars would be waiting to be loaded with tanbark [typically from oak trees; used for tanning hides into leather]. The tannery at Green Forest — now Buena Vista — was a large consumer of this bark.

As time went by there was excitement about the development of a tin mine. A survey was made for a railroad from Crowder to the mine, while the railroad was never built, Crowder was "on a roll" and in 1891 the post office name was changed to Cornwall, after the tin min-

ing center in England.<sup>5</sup> A letter to the *Gazette*, published on August 21, 1891, explained:

One year ago the Irish Creek Development Company bought a farm known as Irish Creek Farm and have had it surveyed and laid off for a town named Cornwall. The Company is now building a hotel to cost \$8,000, and have also been opening ore banks. There are two saw mills at work on the headwaters of Irish Creek and Pedlar. Both mills haul lumber to Cornwall and ship it. Mr. Shelton of the firm of Shelton and Sale, of Lexington was here on the 19th with a party of capitalists looking at the resources of Cornwall.

Another *Gazette* article on the same date noted: "The Rife Hydraulic Ram,<sup>2</sup> located by Mr. J. E. Thomas at the Hotel Cornwall, is working admirably. It throws over four thousand gallons of water per day, up a hill one

2 The ram was an effective, inexpensive way of pumping water uphill. It was prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rife, the manufacturer, had its foundry in Waynesboro, Virginia.



General store, Cornwall (left).

hundred and twenty feet high. It neither eats nor sleeps but is always at work. There are now three of these rams at work on South River located by pleasant gentlemen." A contemporary account noted, however, that the "hotel never opened and never had a guest." The failure of the tin mine to live up to expectations, coupled with an economic depression, slowed development at Cornwall until 1916, when the South River Lumber Company began operations in the Blue Ridge. At that time a large sawmill and ancillary facilities were constructed near the mouth of White's Run. This site became known as Cornwall, and "old Cornwall" virtually disappeared. The present-day village makes use of some of the sawmill buildings but is almost entirely a residential community.<sup>3</sup>

In 1891, when the *Gazette* writer was extolling the virtues of Vesuvius, there must not have been a railway station at Riverside<sup>6</sup> because he tells much about the history and promise of the community to the north but simply mentions that the railroad had provided for further expansion by purchasing land. Riverside was the Rockbridge anchor for the White's Gay road to Lynchburg, on which were situated a church, a distillery and a tavern. When the railroad arrived, the village grew, with stores, a post office, and several houses.

The Buena Vista boom also brought prosperity to Riverside. One William Sumpter Beard, the correspondent for the *Rockbridge County News* during these years, was justifiably proud of the history and progress of the area. He wrote that J. W. McCown in 1807 began operating a water-powered foundry and machine works, the principal product being cutting tools. Beard let no occasion pass without reminding his readers that McCown had envisioned and produced the sickle that made McCormick's reaper a success and that McCormick did not give McCown credit. McCown's shop also cast the pipes for Lexington's first water works. As with Cornwall, Riverside became a shipping point for forest products, iron ore, and, during the Buena Vista building boom, bricks.

3 See Horace Douty, "The South River Lumber Company of Cornwall, Virginia," in *Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings XIII* (2009), pp. 45–58.

In spite of the area's prosperity and glowing descriptions of the railroad and industries, there was a dark side. Accounts relate that Jack Campbell's distillery burned, destroying thirty barrels of whiskey. Mr. Decker had forty panels of fence burned in a fire caused by a train. Logging accidents were numerous. Livestock were killed by trains. A little girl tragically drowned in a mill race.

So much has been written about Old Buena Vista<sup>7</sup> that it need only be said that it did not die when the iron works were destroyed by Federal troops during the Civil War. The mill went back into operation, C. R. Jordan had a cannery there, and sawmills and a barrel-stave mill were also in business there.

The newspaper writers almost overlooked the village of South River,<sup>8</sup> located near the confluence of the South and North [Maury] Rivers. There is good reason for this. South River was a station on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, not the Norfolk & Western, which was being locally boosted. Furthermore, the village had enjoyed its heyday earlier, when the canal was operating. Construction of the canal had begun at Balcony Falls and proceeded northward toward Lexington. Sections were put into operation as soon as they were completed, so South River became an important landing well before Jordan's Point at Lexington. It served the industries and farms of "Iron Valley" as well as a considerable portion of northern Rockbridge County, and continued to compete with Jordan's Point after the canal had been completed.

In 1860, Schuyler Bradley was shipping plows and plow parts to Lynchburg, Richmond, Big Island, and Tye River; William Womeldorf was shipping lumber to Lynchburg; William M. Kirkpatrick, sent bar iron to Lynchburg; and Strain Carson shipped bales of hay, weighing 220 pounds apiece, to Lynchburg and Richmond.

The village probably had a dual personality, East Bank and West Bank (my names). The West Bank had a section of canal, the lock and a basin to handle the boats. This is the Lincoln House side and served Lexington. The East Bank had a mill, warehouse, and the terminal for the tramway from the furnace. Later the C&O Railroad was on this side. Today the site is interesting

to archeologists because of the village site itself and the massive stone canal works.

None of these places appear on the Gilham Map of Rockbridge [pp. 2–3 above], which was made before the coming of the canal or railroad.

Before the days of combine harvesters, farmers cut the grain and shocked or stacked it. As the harvest season was ending, custom threshers would move through an area and thrust out the harvested grain. Their operation would consist of the threshing machine (or box); a steam engine; and a water wagon. The steam engine was quite heavy and often threatened the integrity of bridges. G. F. and H. W. Decker had such an outfit and in 1894 threshed nearly 30,000 bushels of wheat, which seems to be an impressive production for the Valley.

Mr. Beard, the writer for the *Rockbridge County News*, had frequent comments regarding farmers and farming. In 1892, for example, “Mr. Joseph Topping was down on the river today on business. He has been totally blind for seven years. Last fall he shucked 125 bushels of corn.” Another item noted that J. G. Alexander shipped 700 bushels of apples from Midvale. In several dispatches Beard mentions the success or failure of the paw paw crop. I don’t know if these are tongue-in-cheek comments or not.

My particular interest lies in the iron works. One of the oldest is the Irish Creek furnace, variously dated

1760 to 1779, but there is little to identify the site. The remains of Taylor’s foundry on Irish Creek farm are visible, however. Other works in this area along Irish Creek were destroyed by floods and have not been located.

The Buena Vista works are obvious but across the river at an earlier time was the McCluer operation, called Beverley, which consisted of a furnace and a foundry. The site has been disturbed by mining for marl and the actual location is not easy to identify. Of interest regarding this operation is a fireback at Mulberry Hill<sup>4</sup> which was cast by the McCluer foundry. It seems that work ceased there about 1878.

The tramway mentioned in connection with the village of South River was about a mile long and served the McCluer works and it appears that the same roadbed was used later by the Jordans at the Buena Vista furnace. This tramway was entirely different from the one at Midvale. It had a relatively flat curving grade and probably had small iron wheeled cars pulled by mules on wooden rails. It was used to haul ore from and iron products to boats on North River.

4 Circa 1798 estate at the west edge of Lexington.

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### THE McCLUER FIREBACK AT MULBERRY HILL

Writes the historian of Kappa Alpha Order, owner of Mulberry Hill today: A special feature of the northeast room fireplace is an iron fireback, 18 inches by 25 inches, that bears a bas relief of Fame with a trumpet. Tumbling out from the trumpet are sixteen stars and the legend “Be Liberty Thine.” The piece is signed “Halbert and Moses McCluer.” The fireback is one of the finest pieces of folk art yet to be discovered in Rockbridge County.

