



A SUNDAY DRIVE THROUGH ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY

VESUVIUS

Based on a Slide Presentation by

Richard Halseth

To the Rockbridge Historical Society

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VESUVIUS CAN TRACE its roots back to 1828, when the Vesuvius Furnace was constructed about a half mile south of today's post office. The furnace — named, yes, for the volcano in Italy — was built by Thomas Mayberry and Thomas Jolly. Mayberry had been a partner of William Weaver, owner of Buffalo Forge, near Glasgow. They parted ways in 1826. (Later, from 1836 until 1856, Mayberry operated Cotopaxi furnace just north of here, in Augusta County.)

Edward Bryan and Daniel Mathews purchased Vesuvius Furnace in 1833 and eight years later, Mathew Bryan bought it. It closed in 1854. Remnants of the stack are still visible on the west side of South River about a half-mile south from route 608.

Local mines supplied ore for the furnace, charcoal came from local forests, and marl and limestone for flux

were mined locally too. The main sources of ore were the Dixie Mines, operated by the Alleghany Ore & Iron Co., just over the Augusta County line; Mary Creek Mines, two miles southwest; and the Midvale Mine, south of the community of Midvale, on the crest of South Mountain.

Pig iron produced by the furnace was transported by wagon to the North River and put onto batteaux — some going upriver to Gibraltar Forge in northwestern Rockbridge or down to Scottsville, almost halfway to Richmond, on the James River.

Dick Halseth is a Civil War historian, author and speaker. He notes: "Lillian Cash, a revered local historian, wrote a book on the history of the community, *Vesuvius: Past and Present*, published by the Vesuvius Community Association. I have mined her history extensively for this presentation."

The painting of Vesuvius at the top of this page is by Kitty Cash.



Vesuvius, showing the location of the furnace, in an 1882 map from the Library of Congress. The South River is highlighted in blue.

Enter Cyrus McCormick

Cyrus McCormick received his patent for the reaper in 1834, but commercial production did not begin until five years later. In the meantime, his father gave him a 300-acre farm on South River, near Midvale Station, and his attention was diverted from farming to smelting iron ore as he and his father launched a partnership.

But soon after the McCormicks began operating their furnace, the price of pig iron dropped from \$50 to \$25 a ton, and the enterprise collapsed in 1839. Their farm was reported to be heavily mortgaged to cover the losses at the furnace. Cyrus sold his farm at Midvale to meet the demands of creditors. His father had a hard time keeping the old homestead, "Walnut Grove," but eventually the entire debt was paid back.

There is a story that the Rockbridge County Sheriff came to the McCormick home one afternoon to serve a summons to young Cyrus concerning indebtedness on the iron furnace venture. Cyrus went out to sit on the front porch, which, according to the tale, was in Augusta County. That meant the Rockbridge sheriff could not serve the papers, so he finally thanked the family for its hospitality, mounted his horse and rode away, giving Cyrus time to correct his financial problems.

Farmers and Other Settlers

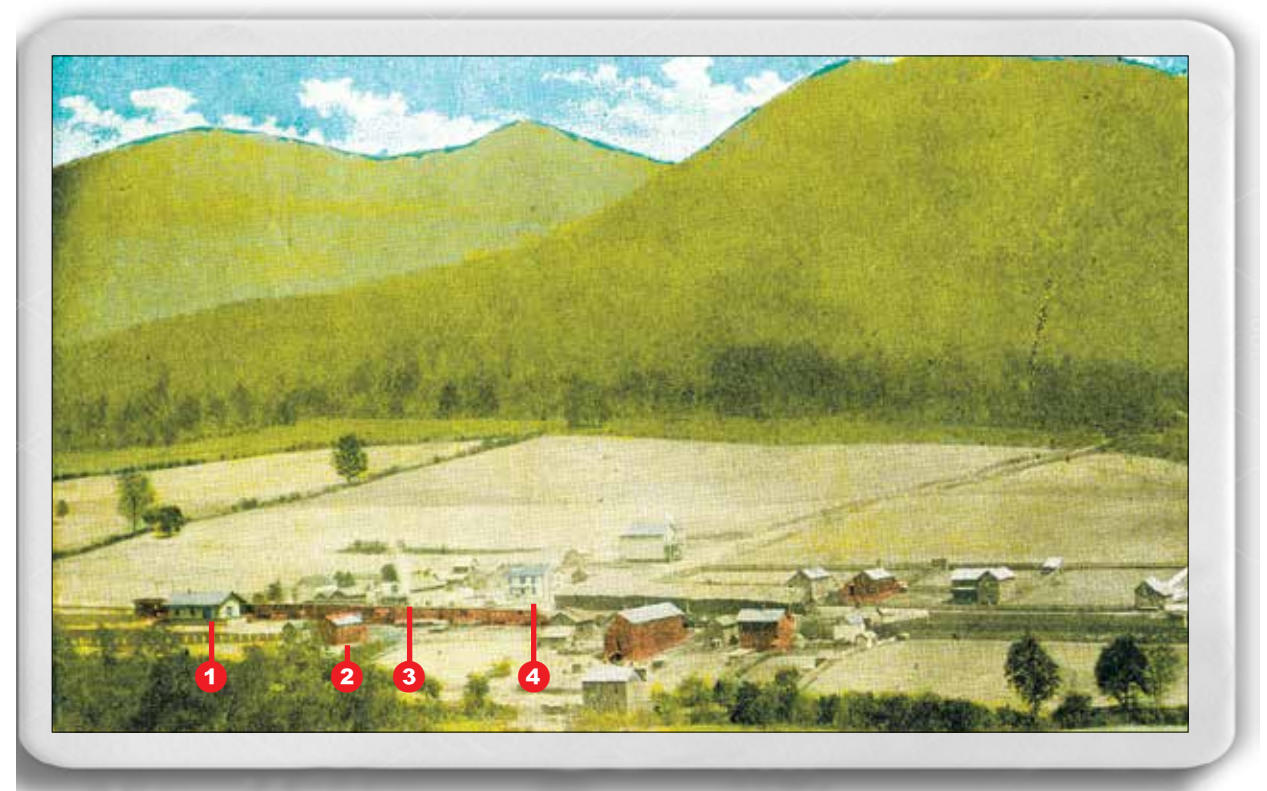
Here lies the history of Vesuvius. Early settler family names included Bradley, Bryan, Campbell, Cash, Crist, Drawbond, Fitzgerald, Hits, Humphries and Wright. They worked mainly in farming, transportation, mining, iron making and lumbering. Most are buried in Mount Carmel Presbyterian Church Cemetery in Steele's Tavern. Many lie in Augusta Memorial Park; some are in the Haines Chapel Cemetery.

In 1870, the dominant occupation in the area was farming. Seven mills between Vesuvius and the McCormick farm served those farmers. By 1890, however, we see a preponderance of railroad workers and those working in mining and smelting. After all, the railroad came through in the mid-1880s and there were tracks to be laid, rights-of-way to maintain and depots to be managed.

From 1900 to 1920, lumbering was the dominant source of employment, although railroads remained significant. These were the early years of the South River Lumber Company.

In 1940, we find a major shift in employment. Lumber and railroad work were in decline, and road

This 1910 postcard photo of Vesuvius shows the depot at the left ❶, the Mangus store ❷ on the near side of the tracks, Austin's store ❸ on the far side of the tracks, and the Austin home. ❹



construction and maintenance — largely on the Blue Ridge Parkway and state highways — were the dominant source of employment. We also see folks tied to the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Churches

As in most small communities in the south it is the churches that bind people together. In Vesuvius there are two churches, the Vesuvius Baptist Church, shown on the next page, and the smaller Emory United Methodist Church. Presbyterians worship in Steele's Tavern at the Mount Carmel Church.

The Emory Methodist Church was established before 1808 and at first was called simply the "Meeting House." Later it became Bryans Furnace, but that structure succumbed to fire in 1870. The replacement structure was sited on route 56 at the South River bridge and was dedicated in 1872. The original design had a pot-bellied stove in the center which was later replaced by fireplaces on either side.

In 1891 the first Baptist church building arose adjacent to Emory Methodist. The Baptists did not have

a minister until 1893, and through 1931 they shared a minister with the Greenville Baptist Church. In 1924, N. L. Whiteside donated two acres for a new building and parsonage, and a year later the old church was torn down and the new building, on the other side of the village, was dedicated in November 1925. The parsonage was completed in 1947. By 1962 the members enjoyed



Emory United Methodist Church



Left: Vesuvius Baptist Church

Below: Marl Creek Baptist Church, unused today



a new education building. The church was burned by an arsonist in 1990 and the sanctuary was rebuilt shortly thereafter.

This church was the center of the community. Church attendance was mandatory on Sunday mornings and evenings — and on Wednesday evenings too.

Marl Hill Baptist Church, the black Baptist church, thrived from about 1883 to 1950. Today it sits abandoned on the north side of route 56.

Business and Industry Reach Vesuvius

THE VESUVIUS ECONOMY initially centered on iron production at the Vesuvius and Cotopaxi Furnaces. There were tin mines on Irish Creek, just to the south, that became economically viable when the railroad came in 1882. The area is also home to some

rare minerals — one of which, churchite, is a scarce, rare-earth phosphate found only here, in Cornwall, England, and in Auerbach, Germany. Another rare-earth phosphate is called rockbridgeite and is found only here and in Cornwall, England, and Custer County, South Dakota.

Logging played a huge role in the history of this area. The South River Lumber Company in Cornwall — about 12 miles downriver from Vesuvius, and earlier called Crowder — at one time employed 250 workers. From 1916 to 1938, the Norfolk & Western hauled more than 100 million board feet of logs to the sawmill at



South River Lumber Company mill, undated photograph

Cornwall over narrow-gauge railroad tracks covering some 50 miles. Horace Douty has written of the lumber company in the Rockbridge Historical Society's *Proceedings*, and visitors can see a reproduction of the tracks at milepost 34.3 on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



The Vesuvius Plow Works, established in 1843, was located on route 56, just west of town. It used pig iron from Vesuvius Furnace to manufacture plows. In 1870, after the Civil War, the foundry was bought by William Sheldon Humphries. Later his son, William Franklin Humphries, joined as a partner. The younger Humphries stayed on until his death in 1945, when his son, Hugh Lyle Humphries, was made manager. Hugh's brother, Harold Berry Humphries, was also active. In later days, the plant made only plow parts and had to import pig iron from Birmingham, Alabama. In February 1958 the foundry ceased operations, and in 1969 Hurricane Camille destroyed the remains.

How many of you remember an action-packed movie in 1956 called *The Great Locomotive Chase*, starring Fess Parker, who was gaining fame at the time as television's king of the wild frontier, Davy Crockett?

It was about a Union spy, James Andrews, played by Parker, who along with others in 1862 sneaked into Atlanta and commandeered a railroad engine, nicknamed the General. They started back toward Chattanooga with the intent of destroying track and bridges to disrupt Confederate supply lines. They were finally caught, and some, including Andrews, were executed.

The General was restored to operating condition and traveled through the southern states in 1962 and 1963 and — what a special day! — it stopped in Vesuvius! The depot was packed, and some local folks got to ride up to Waynesboro. Sadly, I arrived 34 years too late.

William Sheldon Humphries bought the operation in 1870. He was born in 1843 and married Maria Louisa Clemmer in 1869. He enlisted in the Confederate Army on April 11, 1862, at the age of nineteen, and served in Company E, 5th Virginia Infantry. He fought at Gettysburg and must have been wounded and taken by Union soldiers to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. After almost two years, on February 18, 1865, he was exchanged. He died in Rockbridge Baths in 1928 and is buried in Mount Carmel Presbyterian Church cemetery.

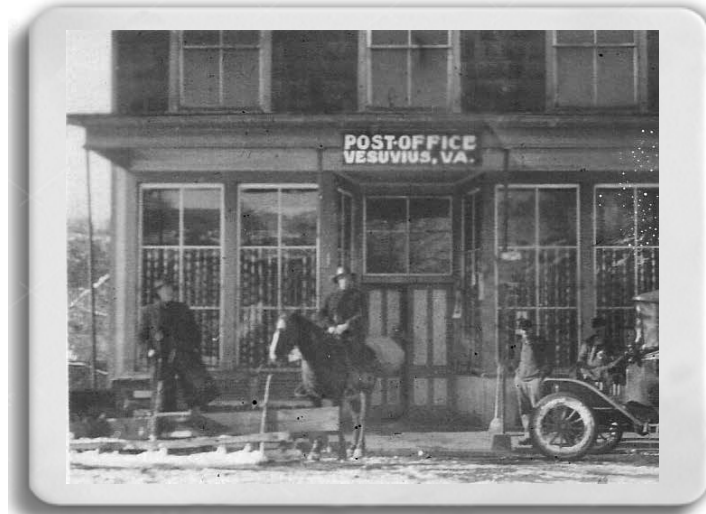


Vesuvius depot, c. 1930

Arrival of the Railroad

THE MAJOR economic development in Vesuvius after the Civil War was the coming of the Shenandoah Valley Railroad. The first train into Vesuvius arrived on March 17, 1882, with a wood-burning engine, an express car and two coaches. Stephen Mayo was the engineer, and the line ran from Hagerstown to Roanoke. Eight years later the Shenandoah railroad was purchased by the Norfolk & Western, now the Norfolk Southern Railway.

In addition to operations, the railroad provided jobs for construction and maintenance. Construction crews were paid \$1.10 per 10-hour day. That works out to \$3.11 an hour in today's money.



Left, Austin Store today; above, Mangus store about 1920

By 1926 four passenger trains passed through Vesuvius each day, two northbound and two southbound, each carrying mail as well.

Vesuvius became the busiest stop between Hagerstown and Roanoke. That's a 239-mile run. Outgoing commodities included wood, logs, tan bark, hay, huckleberries, chestnuts and plows. Incoming was coal and fertilizer by the carload.

Other economic activity notwithstanding, farming was the mainstay of the area in the 1800s and 1900s. To serve the farmers there were the millers. Osceola Mill was one of seven mills on Marl Creek. Only it and the McCormick Mill remain. (Both were part of the McCormick estate.) Osceola was built by a brother of Cyrus McCormick. It was purchased by Zachary Rawlings in 1874 from Hugh Lyle. Rawlings built a small store next to the mill and a fine house across the road. The mill operated until 1969, when Hurricane Camille hit. Osceola was renovated as a home and then an inn and restaurant.

Retail Establishments

THE TWO MOST INTERESTING retail businesses in Vesuvius were stores located on Routes 56 and 609 just across the tracks from each other. These are the Mangus store and the Austin store.

According to the late Bobby Berkstresser, who years ago purchased the interior goods of what we today

know as the Austin Store, the first store ledger was dated 1888. The store was first operated by Captain Rawlings. Edgar Secrist, previously a partner with Christian Byrd (C.B.) Mangus in the store on the west side of the tracks, leased the store from Captain Rawlings, and eventually Secrist bought it. This store has been made famous by O. Winston Link, who took a now-famous series of photos there.

Adjacent to Austin's store to the north was another very small store that a Mr. McClung operated in the 1930s and '40s. Helen Berkstresser remembered as a teenager that in the afternoon Mr. McClung would cut a block of cheese and give everyone cheese and crackers while they listened to music from the local guitar pickers.

Across the tracks to the west was the C. B. and S. D. Mangus Store. It was several stories high and carried a great variety of merchandise. It even had its own scrip, so that customers who paid for their goods with

No community is complete without a ghost. The present owner of the Mangus family house, Brenda Spillers, told of its haunting, apparently by a Confederate soldier, eventually identified as one of S. D. Mangus's sons, who as a Virginia Military Institute cadet would have worn a uniform that could be taken as that of a Confederate soldier. Stove burners going on and off, items moving, apparitions in the window — this house has them all.



Gertie's — perhaps today's most well-known establishment

hides, vegetables, berries and other products would have to spend their money in the store. It had a post office and a barber shop. A group of gypsies would visit yearly and set up a tent in front of the store to sell cloth to locals.

Mr. Mangus and his son ran the store until 1946, when he sold it to Clarence T. Cash, who had worked there before World War II. In 1958 the store burned and did not reopen.

The "new" store and post office was built in 1959 by Cam and Floyd Groah. In the 1960s and '70s it was the town's general store, selling groceries, hardware, tires and feed. The Cash families — Clarence and his two brothers, Toad and Harold — ran the store into the '70s. Clarence continued to operate the store into the early '90s until finally retiring.

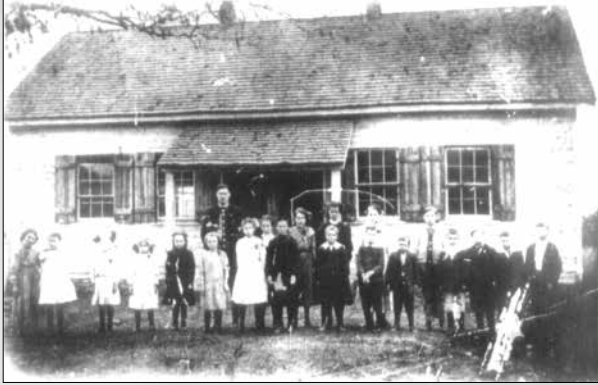
Several other stores operated in Vesuvius, and one was C. U. Bradley's. He bought it in the early 1950s and in the '70s his son, Lester, took it over. Today we know this store reverently as Gertie's.

Camille Strikes

MOTHER NATURE inflicted Vesuvius with some devastating floods over the years. Two were particularly devastating. The first, in 1842, destroyed the Avery & Bradley Foundry on Irish Creek. The second, in 1969, was Hurricane Camille, which devastated the entire South River area. It destroyed Route

Directly below, Route 56 after Camille; bottom, remnants of the foundry





Vesuvius school . . . and the community center that replaced it in 1957

608 from Cornwall to Vesuvius and Route 603 through Irish Creek. It heavily damaged Route 56 as well, and took out the abandoned Vesuvius Plow Works.

The Community

IN EARLIER TIMES, nobody in Vesuvius locked their doors. The community brought up the children. If you got caught doing something wrong you'd be in trouble twice — once with a neighbor who caught you and again when you got home.

Baseball was a favorite pastime. Teams played in the Babe Ruth League against teams from Fairfield and other local communities. The old ball field remains. Just go down Ball Diamond Trail under the railroad bridge and you'll find the old bleacher seats.

During the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps employed local young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-eight in camps



What remains of the baseball field: bleachers

along the Blue Ridge. Camp Vesuvius, F-9, was just south of town on South River Road. Established in May 1933, it initially had 191 enrollees. Projects they undertook included improving streams, cleaning roadsides, improving timber stands, constructing roads and bridges, placing telephone lines and building horse trails. More particularly, Camp F-9 worked on the construction of Mary's Creek Road and South River Road. It built the Taylor Hollow, South Mountain, Whetstone Ridge and Appalachian Trails and placed telephone lines from Irish Creek to Buena Vista.

The Nature Camp just south of Vesuvius was built in 1952–53 by the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs. Today it is operated by the Nature Camp Foundation, as a private, non-profit, residential, co-ed summer camp for children in grades five through twelve, providing education in natural history and environmental science.

For many years education was provided in a one-room school house located near the old Baptist Church. The schoolhouse burned in 1907.

Its replacement opened in 1908, with no electricity or running water. Its pupils came not only from Vesuvius but also from Irish Creek and Montebello, in next-door Nelson County. It closed in 1954 — probably the last one room school in the county — and children transferred to Fairfield Elementary School.

The school house was torn down and a new Community Center went up in its place, funded by the local Ruritan Club. It was completed in 1957.

