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A VISIT TO DENMARK

By Reed Belden

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WHEN YOU TRAVEL WEST from Lexington on Midland Trail, you encounter this sign indicating you have reached Denmark.



From 1845, when the Teafor Inn provided housing for westbound travelers, and 1986, there was commercial activity of some sort in the village. Today, however, all that remains of commercial activity is the closed Ayres Store. Denmark was never an incorporated community, so the village has no formal boundaries.

For our purposes, however, Denmark is centered at the intersection of Big Hill Road and Midland Trail. On the east is the flatland of Kerrs Creek. North Mountain

is 2 to 2½ miles west. To the south is the apex of Big Hill, and on the north one finds White Rock Mountain. Two even smaller and just as evocatively named hamlets, Egypt and Waterloo, grew up west of Denmark.



Ayres Store, today

Above: The Teafor Inn, Denmark, Rockbridge County, Virginia



The Lucy Selina Furnace, shown here perhaps in 1883, was the centerpiece of the Longdale Iron Company in the Alleghany County village of Longdale, across North Mountain from Denmark.

Two commercial activities across North Mountain were the foundation for the development of Denmark.

The Longdale Iron Company was established by John Jordan and James Irvine in 1829, and they named its chief furnace, the Lucy Selina, for their wives.

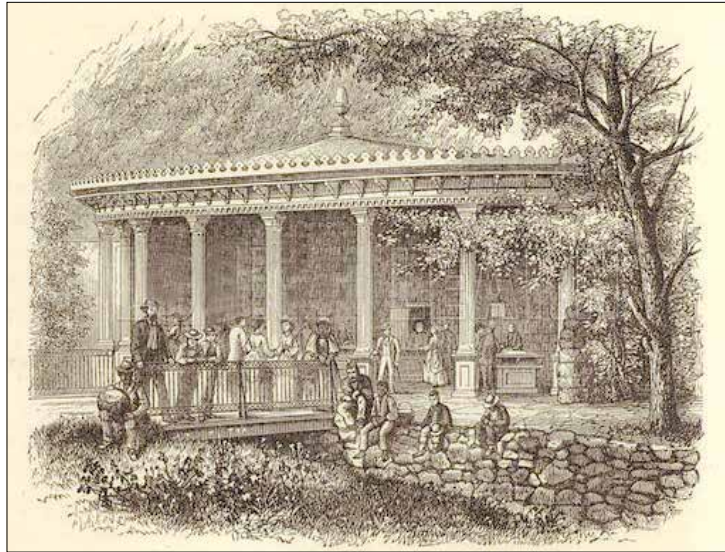
Around the same time, the Rockbridge Alum Springs began operation, catering to folks seeking relaxation and restored health. Because of its remote location, visitors stayed for a week or more, and naturally the resort required not only help to serve its guests and maintain the facility but also provisions for them.¹

Many early settlers came from Collierstown and their descendants still live in the area. Family names familiar

¹ See "Historic Springs of Rockbridge" by Erich Faber, in *Rockbridge Epilogues* No. 33, esp. pp. 2–4.

Author's note: Early in the last century, Cleopatra Hughes Hartbarger (1894–1979) and her daughter Seatta Hartbarger Teaford (1918–2012) undertook a project to record the history of the Denmark area beginning with its first settlement in the early 1800s, resulting in a document that came to be known known as the Teaford Papers. More recently, Barbara Bennington Nunnley, her brother Stewart Bennington, and to a lesser extent I have endeavored to expand the work of Cleopatra and Seatta. This presentation is based on the work of all these folks. Many of the photographs are by Stewart Bennington; others are by the author.

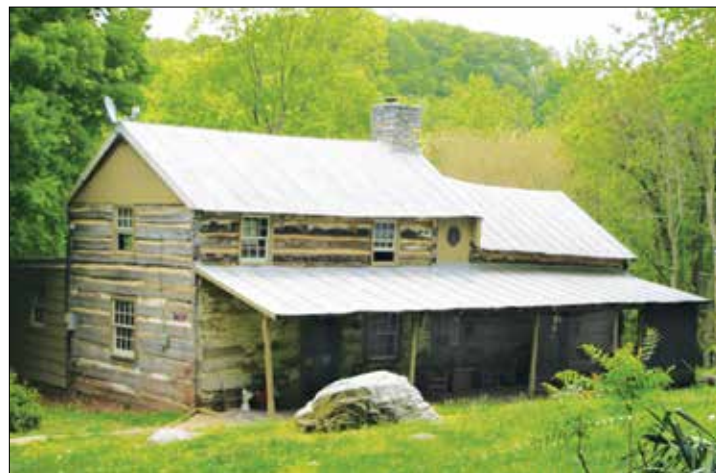
Reed Belden (1932–2024) was active in both the Rockbridge Historical Society and Historic Lexington Foundation. An industrial chemist by profession before retiring to Lexington, he researched and wrote prolifically about the history of the county's villages. He left his papers to RHS, and they can be found in Washington and Lee University's Special Collections.



Rockbridge Alum Springs in an 1875 sketch

today were familiar then, including Ayres, Bennington, Carter, Cunningham, Chittum, Dunlap, Entsminger, Goodbar, Hartbarger, Harris, Hostetter, Hughes, Irvine, Knick, Montgomery, Teaford and Wilhelm.

These families' homes were, at first, log houses from the abundant local forests in the area.



John G. Bennington is said to have built this house in 1845 in which his descendants lived until the death of Mary Bennington in 1981.

LIFE IN DENMARK

IN DENMARK's earliest days, you had little choice but to build your own house, grow your own produce and grain and meat, churn your own butter, weave your own cloth, and make your own soap, candles and even your own whiskey and brandy.

This passage from the Cleopatra and Seatta Teaford Papers gives a flavor of life in those days:

These hills were good grazing farms, up on the mountain had about 200 acres of the best grazing land around, most of the farmers raised cattle and grain. They built fences to protect the grain fields against the cattle and horses. They had trouble with bears in the cornfield, a bear would damage a lot of corn, they raised wheat and rye and some flax. . . . Potatoes began as an important crop, fruit trees were set out, late peach orchards was set, money was made on the peach crop. Mrs. Hartbarger wove the flax and wool on a hand loom, she made suits and dresses and counterpanes blankets and all her bed linen out of flax.

Life was hard, yet there was occasional time for relaxation, especially in the hard winters when no fields needed tending. Many residents played musical instruments. Here are Aaron Reynolds, Henry Hughes and Valou Knick with their instruments. Later, folks could listen to music on the



Three instrumentalists

newly developed Victrola. This Victrola belonged to Henry Clay Hughes. It was restored by Todd Bennington and sits in the family home today.



The Bennington family's Victrola

By the 1860s Denmark was thriving. There were 15 families in Waterloo and 6 in Egypt. On Big Hill road there were 14 families. Large families were common In Denmark, as they were throughout of the country. Ten children were not uncommon; Thelma Downey was one of 17 siblings.

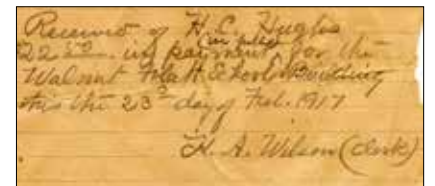
Walnut Flats School



SCHOOLS

TO PROVIDE for the education of these children, Denmark had five schools by 1875. Each school had a single room and provided schooling through the seventh grade:

- Waterloo School was at the head of Waterloo Road on a half acre lot donated jointly by Job Bennington and James Cunningham. Later the building was bought by David Buckner, who restored it as a workshop.
- At the intersection of Waterloo Road and Midland trail sat Oak Knoll School. (In the Teaford Papers, it was spelled Oak Nole.) The building was later bought by the Teafords.
- Up Midland Trail was Stonewall School.
- On Big Hill, in an area with abundant walnut trees, was Walnut Flats School. It was eventually purchased by Henry Clay Hughes and became a residence.
- At Midland Trail near the intersection of Big Hill Road sat the Denmark School.



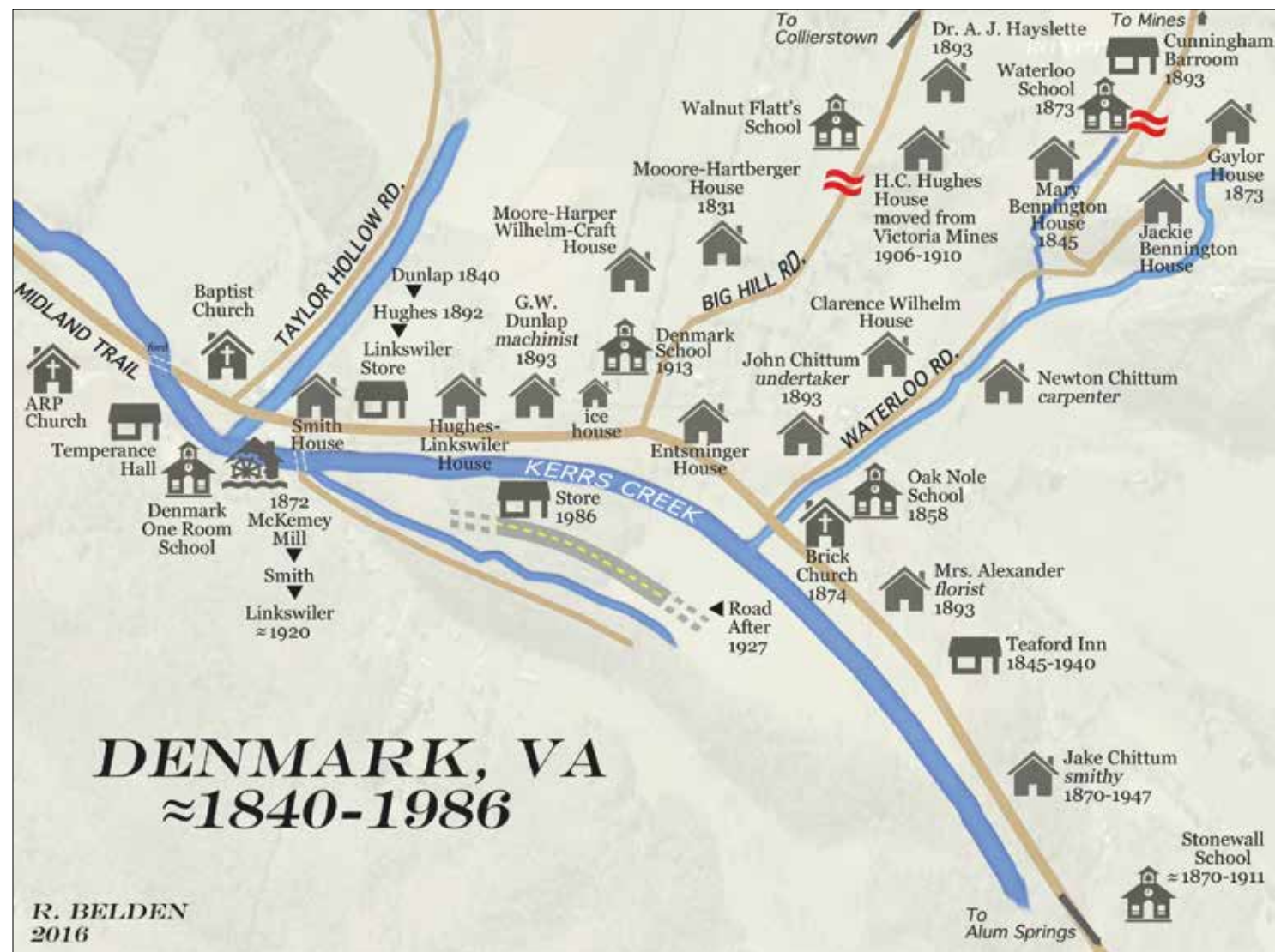
In 1917, H. C. Hughes bought the Walnut Flats School for \$22.50.

These five schools operated until 1911 when they



The consolidated Denmark School, in use 1911–43, on Big Hill Road

were consolidated as Denmark school on Big Hill Road, up from West Midland Trail. This school, no longer there, operated until 1943, when the first Highland Belle School opened.



A map reconstructs Denmark in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Note that Midland Trail has not yet been moved to the north side of Kerrs Creek.

CHURCHES

RELIGION was as important as education to the families of Denmark. Before construction of the two village churches, schools were used for prayer services and Sunday school.

In 1874 Robert Montgomery donated the land for a Presbyterian Church. The Baptists, organized in 1868, met in that church building until the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church was constructed in 1906. On Midland Trail was a Gospel Hill ARP Church.



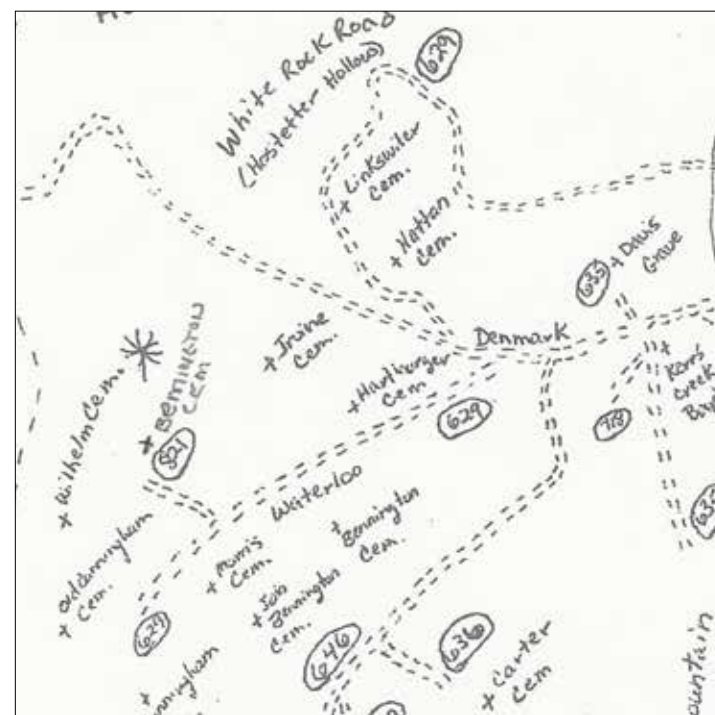
Kerrs Creek Baptist Church, c. 1950

CEMETERIES

THERE WAS no central cemetery in Denmark, so families often maintained cemeteries on their own property.

The hand-drawn map on the next page identifies many of the family cemeteries in Denmark.

In just one isolated neighborhood — on a ridge on the property at Waterloo I once owned — one can find the remains of a cemetery, marked by boxwood plants, where the original settlers and their immediate descendants are buried.



Denmark family cemeteries



Bennington Cemetery

Down the ridge is the Irvine family cemetery, of which only the remains of a fence are visible. Across Waterloo Road, behind Mary's Bennington's house, is the Bennington-Gaylor Cemetery.



The Hartbarger cemetery at the entrance to Waterloo is the most formal family cemetery in Denmark.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF DENMARK

IN ITS PEAK YEARS, from 1880 to 1910, Denmark was a prosperous, thriving town, with the 1900 census counting 300 to 400 residents. Over time, commerce became more and more important. The com-

mercial center of Denmark was located on Midland Trail between Taylor Hollow Road west to the Waterloo Road.

Waterloo Road extended over North Mountain, providing a route for men from the Denmark area to find work at the mines or to sell their wares and produce there. Calvin Hughes was said to have loaded 100 pounds of potatoes on one side of his horse, 100 pounds on the other side, and a third 100-pound load on his back to sell there. Lee Vest, who lived in Egypt, made and sold ax handles for use at the mines.

Miners would cross the mountain on Sunday night or Monday morning and return on Friday evening. On their way home, they might stop at the barroom operated in connection with the distillery run by the Cunningham brothers — who weren't the only distillers in the neighborhood. On Big Hill, the Ayres family ran a still, and so did Henry C. Hughes. Tom Alphin had his still on top of North Mountain.

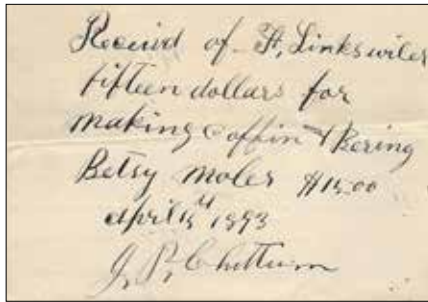
Midland Trail over North Mountain to Millboro and the Alum Springs provided means for some to work at the resort and also an opportunity to sell produce there.

DENMARK was host to all the businesses you would expect to find in a country village at the time:

- In 1840 Robert Dunlap built a general store and blacksmith shop on Midland Trail near the present location of the Kerrs Creek Baptist Church. In 1892 Dunlap ended his blacksmith operation and sold the store to W. C. Hughes, who managed it with his son Moreau until they sold it to Frank Linkswiler. He in turn operated the store until it closed in the early 1900s.
- Jake Chittum opened a blacksmith shop at the western end of Denmark after Dunlap's Blacksmith shop closed.
- Jake McKemy built a flour mill on Kerrs Creek across from today's Baptist church.
- In 1870 a post office opened in Denmark, with Joseph C. Lowman as postmaster. Lowman apparently also ran the mill built by Jake McKemy. In 1875,

Annias Smith purchased the mill from McKemy and became Denmark's postmaster. He operated the mill until his death in 1897, when it was taken over by Frank Linkswiler and operated until 1925, when it was demolished to make way for the relocated road.

- Citizens of the community constructed a temperance hall.
- John Pleasant Chittum was the village undertaker.
- Newton Chittum ran a carpenter shop on Waterloo Road. (Nowadays, Newton, the lead builder of Kerrs Creek Baptist Church and a homebuilder in Denmark and Collierstown, would be called a general contractor.)
- Perhaps most interesting was the presence of a florist.



J. P. Chittum made a coffin for "Betsy Moler" and buried her in 1893 (in fact, probably Betsy Miller, as suggested in county burial records)



The new road through Denmark, 1927

Clifton Forge join with the railroad, some went farther west, some moved to Lexington.

Yet even after the state highway department moved the road across the creek, a certain amount of commercial activity continued in Denmark. The Teafor Inn served Sunday brunch until 1940. Rector Engleman opened a store that continued in business, under various owners, until 1986.

THE DECLINE

A confluence of events in the 1920s marked the decline of Denmark.

The mines and then the Alum Springs closed. A consequence was that many residents, especially the young, had to find work elsewhere. Some moved to



The John Moore House on Big Hill Road, built in 1831, later owned by James and Patsy Moore Harper. Today it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

THE WANING OF DENMARK AFTER 1930

By 1930, the shift from a local economy based on farming to a wage-earning economy was evident in Denmark (and elsewhere). Tourism plummeted as automobiles became ubiquitous and people were no longer constrained by railroads in choosing a vacation destination, and the Alum Springs began to shrink. (It closed altogether in 1941.) The last iron mine closed in 1927. Markets ceased being local. For example, produce could be transported cheaply from the Midwest, and the 12-mile distance from Denmark to the railway station was less and less of an issue.

And so it was that Denmark as a thriving, mostly self-contained and self-sufficient community, waned.

(Extracted and condensed from *The Incorporation of Denmark, Virginia, Into the World Economy*, Ph.D. dissertation at Arizona State University by Michael M. Gregory (Washington and Lee class of 1983)

