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THE BUFFALO FORGE

By D. E. Brady Jr.

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IN THE LATE 1700s, Alexander Baggs¹ owned considerable land along lower Buffalo Creek, north of Glasgow, land that later included the site of Buffalo Forge. Alexander Baggs died in 1789, and his son James inherited a plantation on which the so-called “meeting house” stood. The meeting house was a log facility built in 1748 for the Falling Spring Presbyterian congrega-

1 Sometimes spelled Beggs

tion and used until about 1796. From that plantation, James Baggs sold 65 acres along Buffalo Creek in 1809 to William Wilson, and in 1810 he sold the rest of the meeting house plantation to William Jenkins.

William Wilson built a dam and tilt hammer forge on his 65 acres. Why he chose this site is not clear. Factors that influenced his decision may have included these:

- Water power was available;
- Wilson owned two furnaces, Retreat and Etna, in Botetourt County, about 17 miles away;
- The boatyard nearby where Buffalo Creek flows into the North (now Maury) River was a shipping point for the forge’s output;
- Road traffic to the boatyard provided local customers;
- The forests of the Blue Ridge mountains were a source of charcoal needed by the forge.

Douglas Ellinipsico (Pat) Brady (1916–2001), was the great-grandson of D. C. E. Brady, Buffalo Forge patriarch and a central subject of this article. A Washington and Lee University engineering graduate, Pat was head of W&L’s physical facilities from 1947 to 1992, and mayor of Lexington from 1964 to 1971. He was co-manager of the restoration of the historic Lexington Presbyterian Church after it was destroyed by fire in 2000. He was a leader of both the Rockbridge Historical Society and Historic Lexington Foundation.

Above: Mount Pleasant, the manor house at Buffalo Forge, with smoke rising from a guest house, c. 1860.

Yet these advantages were also available within two miles of Wilson’s Etna furnace in Botetourt.

Wilson would have hauled pig iron by wagon from Botetourt, converted it to wrought iron at the forge in Rockbridge, then sold it locally or shipped it down the James River (not far south of the confluence of Buffalo Creek and the North River) to Lynchburg and Richmond. Records do not indicate that Wilson ever purchased land in the Blue Ridge, so he must have contracted with local woodcutters for his charcoal or hauled it from his woodlands in Botetourt.

In any event, his iron-making venture was not a financial success, and on July 30, 1814, he arranged for its sale to two Pennsylvanians. In fact, Wilson was in jail for debt at the time that Thomas Mayburry and William Weaver first saw the property, so his son did the honors, showing the visitors the two furnaces and the forge, then called Union Forge, in Botetourt. The transaction centered on the furnaces. The forge was almost incidental.

It is not clear how much capital Mayburry had, but he was knowledgeable about the iron business. Weaver, on the other hand, although in the cotton-manufacturing business, had capital and credit available and knew how to use them. The partners apparently expected to strike it rich in this venture — but they were naïve in dealing with Wilson. They discovered after the contract was signed that the Retreat furnace, which was to be their ace, could not operate because it lacked water power and the Etna furnace had to be rebuilt. Furthermore, Wilson could not furnish a clear title for Union Forge. The Pennsylvanians pressed on, however, with Mayburry



William Weaver; date and artist unknown

Brady Family (Washington and Lee University Archives)

coming to Virginia to be the on-site operator while Weaver remained in Philadelphia to handle business arrangements in that financial center.

It appears that at first they attempted to operate with white labor, but found this to be unsatisfactory. Trained white workmen were hard to find, and unreliable when hired. The big difference, as Weaver put it, was that the whites had access to whiskey, while it was prohibited from the enslaved. Soon, however, the Oxford furnace, east of Lynchburg, ceased production and Weaver and Mayburry were able to acquire

slaves experienced in iron work. These skilled workers formed a cadre to which they added other enslaved workers, hired or purchased.² Mayburry, having set up

2 Some local slave owners would hire out their workers on an almost permanent basis. As well, it was an annual affair for industrialists to tour eastern Virginia to hire slaves.



Buffalo Forge 1 on an 1860 Rockbridge map. Other landmarks: Glasgow 2; Falling Spring Presbyterian Church 3; Fancy Hill 4

residence in Botetourt, was on the scene, so the burden of staffing fell on him.

The early years were difficult for the new business, and the partners used every trick in the book to save money and to avoid making payments until the last minute. Weaver believed that Mayburry was not properly applying himself either to hiring workers or to managing the operation, so he began to involve himself more and more in those activities. His distrust caused such a strain that eventually he forced Mayburry out. Weaver became the sole owner of the works and in 1825 he moved to Virginia and took over the business.³

BACK NOW to our friend James Baggs, in Rockbridge to the northeast. We noted that in 1810 he sold to William Jenkins the Meeting House plantation, by then called Mount Pleasant, which Jenkins sold 16 years later to William Weaver. Baggs family tradition has it that James had built Meeting House, which would date the older part to the years between 1789 and 1810. It appears that Jenkins and Weaver each made changes in the structure. At least five major additions can be seen in the present building, only one of which can be even roughly dated.

After moving to Virginia, Weaver married Elizabeth Newkirk Woodson, and for many years thereafter he brought in nieces, nephews and in-laws of “Aunt Eliza” to help run the business and plantations: Charles Gorgas, Will Rex, Charles Danenhour and others. Some returned to Pennsylvania after a short time; some, Weaver sent back; others remained and became important parts of the operation.

Weaver had given the Etna furnace and holdings in Botetourt to Charles Gorgas when Gorgas married Anne Sisson, a Botetourt woman. Gorgas and Will Rex managed the works well until Gorgas’s death in 1862. After his death, however, the property went to Anne and out of

3 It is possible that Weaver had misjudged his partner and that their troubles were due to general business conditions. Mayburry later ran the Gibraltar forge and built and operated the Vesuvius furnace, both in Rockbridge County, and eventually built and operated the Victoria furnace in Louisa County.

FURNACE AND FORGE

A few words of explanation. The furnace of that day was the familiar, heavy stone pyramid with a flat top. It smelted iron ore and produced cast iron in the form of pigs — that is, bars about 40 inches long and weighing about 50 pounds. These pigs were brittle and could not be directly worked in the blacksmith’s shop. Heating the pig iron with charcoal and then hammering it would change the crystalline structure of the pig metal and remove impurities, producing wrought iron — a product that could be shaped by a blacksmith. Production of wrought iron was the function of the forge. The forge building was a simple, usually wood structure, in which were several fires similar to but larger than those in the shop of its customer, the blacksmith. In the forge were at least two hammers, weighing several hundred pounds each. The fires were blown by water-powered bellows, and water power lifted and dropped the hammers. — D.E.B.

the Buffalo Forge control. Rex returned to the forge and assisted in the work there, living into the 20th century.

Danenhour was primarily associated with the Bath Iron Works and appears to have been one of those fired. All three of these men — Gorgas, Rex and Danenhour — had drinking problems, which may have existed before they came to Virginia, although one wonders whether cultural changes might have affected them. Each had come from the urban life of Philadelphia to a backwoods slavery-oriented community, foreign to anything he had known before.

Family tradition holds that Weaver’s wife was not happy at Mount Pleasant and that the ghost of Aunt Eliza still roams the manor house. After Eliza died in 1850, Weaver asked a niece to come and help run the house. When this did not work out, he asked another niece, Emma Gorgas Brady. She came with her husband, Daniel Charles Elliott Brady, and their family, and it seems to have been a good choice. There is no indication that she was unhappy at the forge, and her husband was successful as the manager of the works. Records show that he remained involved with the forge until it ceased operation.

When business was good, the forge community was a bustling place. Garland Thompson Sr., enslaved, made

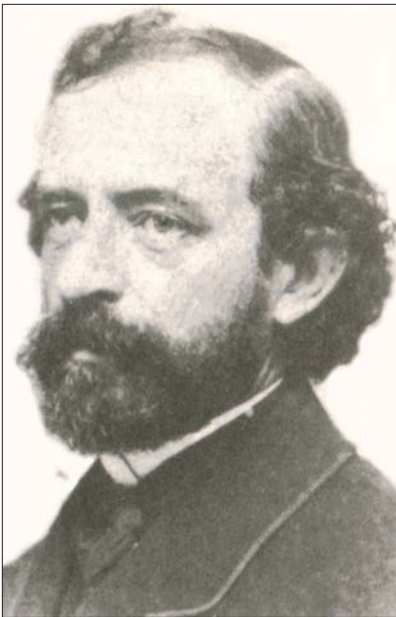
Both photos: Douglas E. (Pat) Brady Family

daily wagon trips for charcoal, and another enslaved man, known as Warder, hauled supplies three times a week to Etna and returned with pig iron and cast products for the mills and forge. There were also frequent trips to the canal landing to deliver iron and pick up supplies. Supporting operations consisted of a general store; a sawmill; mills for flour and for corn; a blacksmith shop; a lime kiln and another kiln for drying lumber; a leather and shoe shop; a carpenter shop; an ice house and a coal house; a dairy; a kitchen for the manor house and probably one for the enslaved residents; and numerous barns, corn cribs and stables. There were also slave quarters, of which two of brick and one of stone remain.

A considerable amount of farming — necessary to accommodate the forge families and the enslaved workers — took place on 1,200 acres, consisting of the



Emma Gorgas Brady



D. C. E. Brady

original Mount Pleasant purchase together with several adjoining farms. As time went on, Weaver purchased a large tract on the western side of the Blue Ridge, primarily for the charcoal its forests could provide, but there was some farm land as well.

In accounts of the forge’s day-to-day operations, the most frequently mentioned problem

was the need to replace the helve, the handle of the forge hammer. Specially selected hickory logs were kept on hand to make helves, which took the carpenter about a day and a half to reinstall. (Charles Dew wrote that when the forge operators wanted a day off they knew how to induce a failure.⁴)

The next most common problem was flooding. The forge was situated low enough by Buffalo Creek to be

4 Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (W. W. Norton, 1994, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year)

WATER POWER AT BUFFALO FORGE

The industrial complex at Buffalo Forge relied on waterpower to grind grain and operate the forge. According to Charles Dew, the grain mills were of two kinds: a multistory stone merchant mill for processing wheat into flour, and a second mill for making cornmeal which appears white in old photos, probably indicating it was a whitewashed, wood-sided, frame (or conceivably log) building. Water for the forge came from fickle Buffalo Creek, which could sweep away a dam in a “freshet,” as happened in March 1818, or deny sufficient water



Crib dam uncovered at Jordans Point in 2019

for full operation during a drought, as happened in August 1858. Water for the mills came from ever-flowing Falling Spring Creek by way of a mill-race that snaked across the hillsides. Water for the forge was impounded by a wooden crib dam, a log or frame construction rather than stone. No photo of it (or the forge itself) is known to survive, but something of its appearance can be gleaned from the remnants of the crib dam that emerged when the concrete dam at Lexington’s Jordans Point was removed in 2019. Expensive stone dams, the alternative method during the 19th century, were built by the well-funded North River Navigation Company for its canal works on the Maury River. — Dan Pezzoni

Unknown photographer; image courtesy of Washington and Lee University Special Collections



Buffalo Forge about the time of the Civil War. The manor house, Mount Pleasant, is at the top center (shown in more detail on the first page of this article). Buffalo Creek runs across the foreground. The three-story building at the upper left was a flour mill.

frequently flooded. While the building never actually washed away, the water would rise into the work area, requiring a massive clean-up job. There was also periodic replacement of the shaft and the anvil, both of which wore out because of continual heavy pounding. When one of these major replacements was made the forge would be stopped for about a week, and other repairs would also be made during the shutdown. Many of the enslaved workers were specialists and when Brady’s journal mentioned routine tasks, the same people would always be doing them. Joe would be in the carpenter shop, Sam and Towler at the forge, Garland hauling coal; but when there was a special need, all hands including the women, would be called on. One such time was the harvest. Now Joe the carpenter operated

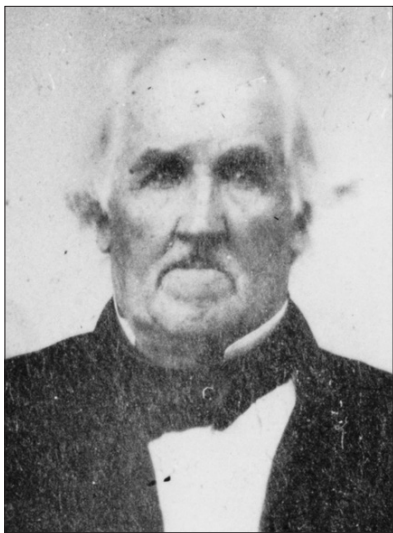
the threshing machine, and he also had the advance responsibilities for preparing all the equipment. Some fields were two miles from the forge and crews, complete with cooks, would go out to do the work. When the grain had been cut, the threshing machine was moved from farm to farm, along with 16 to 18 workers. One year, Cyrus McCormick’s reaper was tested at one of the Weaver farms, but the land there was too rough and hilly. When harvest was completed, all hands were treated to a “harvest dinner.” Planting time, hay making and the corn harvest were other periods of intense farm activity. When the weather became cold enough, hogs were butchered, the meat was cured and the lard rendered. Cattle and sheep seem to have been butchered when the need arose and the

meat was used fresh. Cutting firewood was always an important task: Food had to be cooked and all the residences needed heat — the manor house had 10 fireplaces.

Journal entries from the Civil War era are scarce. An entry dated December 28, 1859, notes that Emma, D. C. E. Brady’s wife, was confined in preparation for the birth of her tenth child. The very next day an enslaved woman, Betty, “has a girl baby.”

On March 23, 1863, William Weaver died, and D. C. E. Brady became the general manager of the forge. He was at this time doing business with the Confederate army, with iron for horseshoes an important commodity. There were trips to the Quartermaster Depot at Millboro in Bath County and a Confederate officer checked on the forge, but otherwise one would hardly know from forge records that a war was on. This would change, however, when Confederate General Thomas Rosser’s brigade camped nearby; his officers dined at Buffalo Forge and their horses were pastured on the Weaver farms.

In June 1864, Will Rex was taken prisoner by Union troops, after which operations at the forge did not resume for two or three weeks, but work at the forge and farm work resumed about as normal. There was a



William Weaver, c 1860. He died in 1863, aged 82.

considerable round of visitors, which was not unusual in itself except that many of the visitors were army personnel and wives. Brady must have had a premonition of trouble; on October 30, 1864, there is a journal entry that he went to church in Lexington, apparently the only time he noted his attendance.

A slide downward began with the new year in 1865. There was sickness and death, and more enslaved workers ran away. On February 4 the forge froze up, then there was a “heavy flood,” which damaged the penstock, and for a month afterward there were heavy rains. The continuing high water delayed bringing in charcoal, but farm work went on as much as the weather allowed. One bright spot came on March 26 when Will Rex, a prisoner since June 12, 1864, returned.

Saturday, May 27, 1865: “Rained all day — all hands quit work as they considered themselves free.”

Family history recalls that the profits from the forge were invested in tobacco that was stored in Richmond warehouses, ready to be shipped to England and sold. But in these last months of the Civil War, fleeing Confederate soldiers burned the warehouses. D. C. E. Brady was left with freed formerly enslaved employees,



Mount Pleasant today — the manager’s house at Buffalo Forge

a large farm and mountain holdings, a forge with a weak market, and a \$500 debt to a Lynchburg bank. The forge limped on a few more years. Some of the freedmen left, some remained as sharecroppers and some as low-paid laborers. The mills continued to operate, the flour mill continuing into the 1920s.

TODAY THE FORGE SITE is difficult to locate. Ruins of the flour mill exist and the store building remains, now used as a residence. Century-and-a-half-old, one-time slave quarters are today in fair

condition [since restored]. The stone dairy stands in a somewhat altered state and the old kitchen has been restored. The iron master’s manor house is the best preserved of the remaining buildings.

Yet there remain interesting challenges to the amateur archaeological historian:

- When and how did the manor house evolve into its present form? Was it originally a one-story stone cottage?
- Exactly where was the Meeting House?
- What changes were made to the flour mill?⁵ When?
- Where was the lime kiln? The lumber drying kiln?
- What happened to the stones from the dam? Were they used in the abutments of the covered bridge?
- How did they get power from the water wheel to the saw mill?
- Why didn’t Union troops destroy the forge?

5 A technique for locating a lost forge is to look along the stream for slag. I did not find slag in Buffalo Creek until recently [1991], and then it was on the wrong side. I have found enough slag and pieces of pig iron at the flour mill to raise the possibility that it was the forge.

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Houses at Buffalo Forge for enslaved workers, preserved today