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STOLEN HISTORY: SOUTH RIVER FROM MARLBROOK TO OLD BUENA VISTA

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WE CALL THE AREA from Marlbrook to Old Buena Vista “South River.” But what, you may ask, is its “stolen history”?

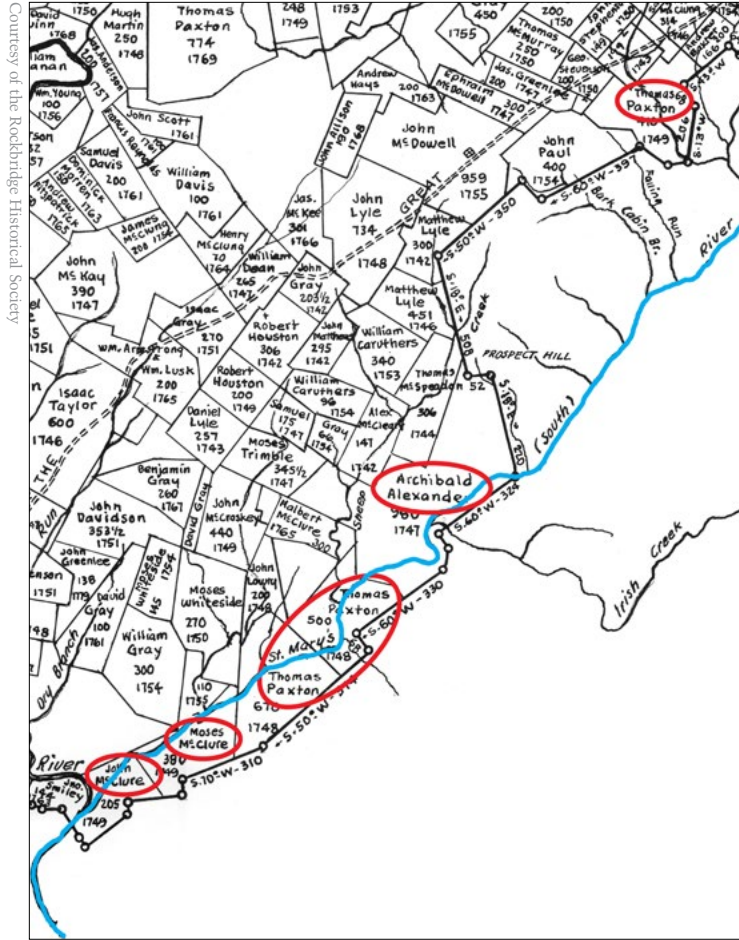
Ever since the settling of South River, floods have ravaged the area, destroying structures and other artifacts of earlier times. Some here today will remember the devastating flood of 1969, caused by Category 5 Hurricane Camille, when the United Methodist church was swept off its foundation. Silas and Francis Clark and their six children were swept away too, and were lost. In short, floods have stolen much of the physical history of South River.

A map of the Borden Grant, shown above and again in greater detail on the next page, indicates that all of the land abutting South River was owned by four people:

Archibald Alexander (acquired in 1747), Thomas Paxton (1748), Moses McClure (1749) and John McClure (1749). Other records suggest that John Mackey (1745), John Shields (1771) and John Glasgow (date uncertain) were also among the early South River settlers; possibly the first two purchased their land from Paxton and the McClures. John Glasgow was another early settler at the confluence of South River and the North River, now the Maury, on 1,000 acres of land given him for service during the Revolutionary War. Three early homes still stand: John Mackey’s son William built his house in 1796, John Shields built his in 1771 and John Glasgow built his house between 1820 and 1824. (See next page.)

While these early settlers sold some large parcels of land, for the most part the land holdings remained intact well into the nineteenth century. In fact, descendants still live on some lands first settled by these pioneers, who were mainly farmers.

Above: Map excerpt showing South River and nearby landowners, Borden Grant map of 1739 (re-created 1964; see p. 2)



The four major recipients of land grants along the South River from the Borden Tract, 1739. The map is a 1964 re-creation by J. R. Hildebrand.

The Borden Grant land was settled largely by people coming from the north along the “Great Wagon Trail,” but others began to settle in South River from the east. Pioneers from the so-called Ware Settlement along the Pedlar River in Amherst County moved west over the top of the Blue Ridge to settle along Irish Creek in Rockbridge County, and by 1800 names like Jarvis, Hartless, Huffman, Cash and Clark — which remain familiar to us today — began to appear in the county records.

Early in the nineteenth century farming on the west side of the South River was surely the main commercial activity. In the mid-nineteenth century, however,

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one member of the enterprising Clark family, Joseph, amassed some 2,541 acres — four square miles — of land. Here he operated a lumber business with two sawmills. He is said to have sold his lumber at Jordan’s Point in Lexington.

Even as early as 1760, with the establishment of the Grant iron furnace at Irish Creek, advent of mining and iron ore processing emerged as profitable businesses. It is likely that the early furnaces used ore mined by their own operators. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, several mines on South Mountain operated as businesses separate from the furnaces. Iron mining continued into the twentieth century.

In addition to Grant’s furnace, there were numerous other small furnaces, foundries and forges along South River through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before construction in 1848 of the Buena Vista furnace by Samuel Jordan. Although it had an associated forge, that furnace was primarily a supplier of iron that was processed by others — for example by the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, the largest ironwork in the Confederacy.

Early South River foundries included those operated by:

- Moses Whiteside, one of the earliest settlers listed as a landholder on the Borden Grant Map (his lands were east of Thomas Paxton’s), a gunsmith who used iron from the South River foundries to make his guns;

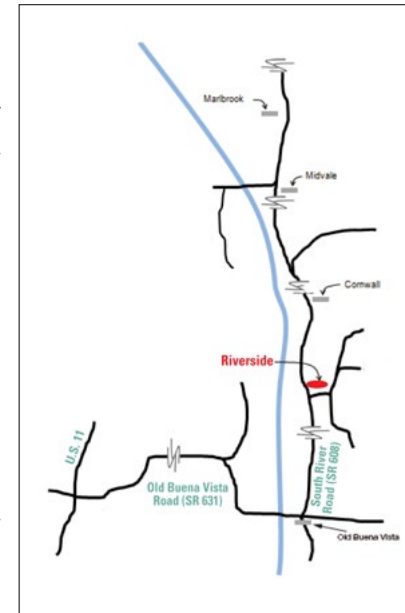


Three surviving homes from early South River days, from top: John Mackey’s, John Shields’s and John Glasgow’s (Tuscan Villa)

- John McCown, who, with his brother, had a small furnace and forge in 1807 where they are reputed to have made blades for the McCormick reaper; and
- The two McCrory brothers, who were said to have operated a furnace, a foundry and forge near Old Buena Vista where, in the years 1810 to 1819 they produced stoves and holloware (the bowl-like counterpart to flatware).

In 1852 William Leyburn and his brother Edward (ancestors of James Graham Leyburn, the academic luminary for whom Washington and Lee University’s library is named) founded the Rockbridge Foundry and Iron Works on Irish Creek. In 1854 Thomas Preston McDowell and his partner Thomas Taylor purchased the facility and began manufacturing Cardwell’s Horse-Powered Threshers, hillside plows (which could be shifted sideways), iron axle-trees (for carriages) and cooking ranges.

IT WAS during this period, early in the nineteenth century, that **Riverside** was developed on land owned by members of the Shields family and named after their estate. The Shields property extended from Riverside south to Old Buena Vista. Samuel Jordan purchased the property for the Old Buena Vista furnace from the Shields family.



Based on commercial records, it appears to have been the most developed and most active village in South River in the period. The Shields family may have sold lots for homes and for various commercial undertakings.

Although tin was first identified at Irish Creek by Dr. W. Armstrong of Washington College in 1848, it wasn’t until 1873 that there was an effort to mine it. William Hulbert, a gold miner with wide experience,

moved to Irish Creek, bought property and undertook tin mining on the property. After two years with little success and some issues about the ownership of the land, Hulbert gave up.

In 1883 the Virginia Tin Mining and Manufacturing Company was organized. In 1884 it sunk its first shaft — only to be stopped in 1886 by litigation.

Three years later, the Boston Tin Mining Company took an option on the property and in 1892 invested \$50,000 in processing equipment. Unfortunately this effort also became entangled in litigation over the ownership of the property, and work stopped again.

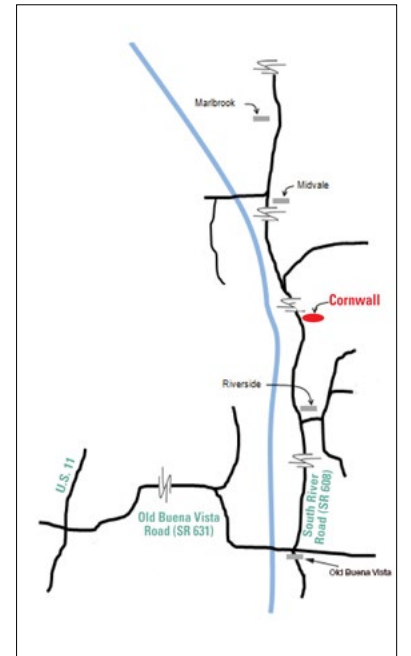
The final effort to recover tin from South River came in 1942. A new group, using a diamond drill, bored four test holes before deciding not to continue.

In the period of the tin exploration other important changes occurred in South River.

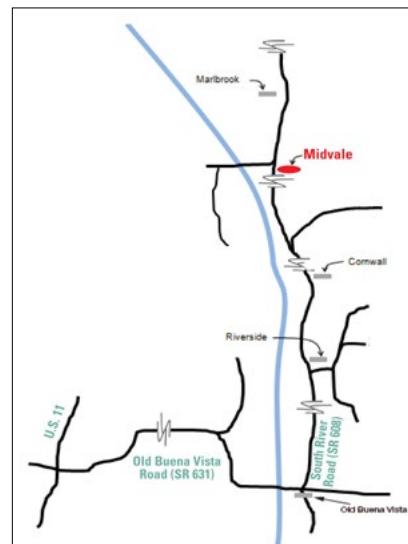
With the coming of the Shenandoah Valley Railroad in 1882, commerce opened to Hagerstown, Maryland, on the north and Roanoke on the South. While there had been some commercial activity in South River earlier, the coming of the railroad and opening of new market presaged marked growth of the area.

While Riverside continued to grow, commercial activity was beginning at the confluence of Irish Creek and South River. At first the area was called Crowder after a storekeeper there.

In 1891 the Irish Creek Tin and Manufacturing Company purchased the Irish Creek Farm and laid out a new town to be called **Cornwall**, after the English tin mining region. Most of this new village was to be north of the present village of Cornwall. Work on this new village went so far as to complete a 48-room hotel.



Mineral processing plant at Midvale, c. 1892



Then came the depression of 1892. The hotel was never occupied, though local students were allowed to hold dances in the ballroom.

Farther up the river we come to the village of **Midvale**, where in 1883 the Midvale Manganese Company operated a mine a mile up South Mountain. The manganese ore was moved from the mine to processing equipment at Midvale by an overhead tramway.

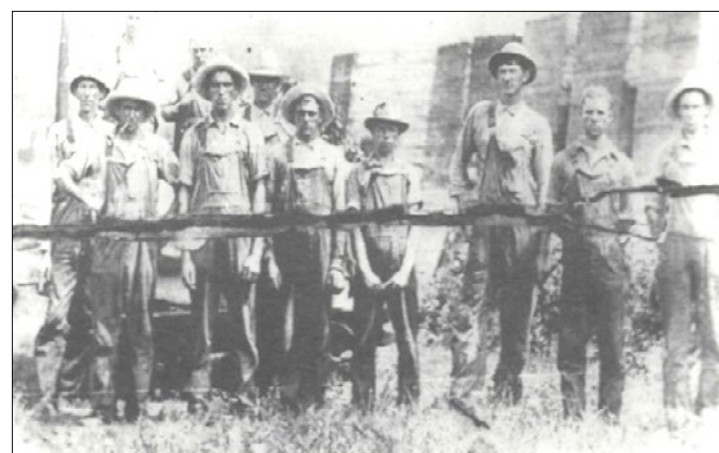
In 1883, at the time of the opening of the manganese mine and the coming of the railroad, Midvale had a post office, a school, a general store, a grist and planing mill owned by S. P. Campbell, an iron mine operated by Paxton and Dingle, and a brickyard owned by H. H.



Wallace. Midvale was also the home of the Shenandoah Valley Railroad maintenance unit for the area.

The last village on our tour northward is **Marlbrook**. While there are some remnants of the other three South River villages we have visited, nothing is left of Marlbrook. We know that it was situated near the intersection of Marlbrook Creek and South River.

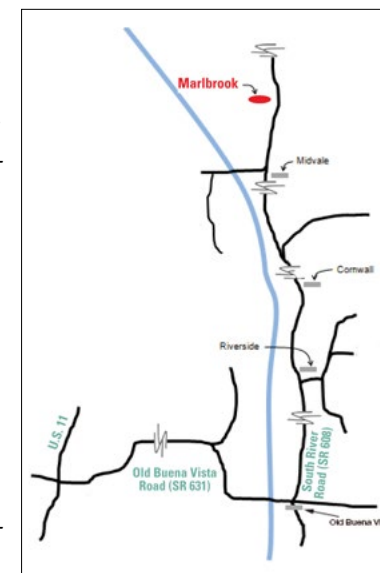
Marl was at one time an important product in the South River area. Marl was used first in the area as a flux to remove oxides in the iron furnaces. Its commercial value in the early twentieth century shifted to fertilizers, but by 1931 it had been replaced by agricultural lime and local production ceased. In addition to Marlbrook



Business activity at Midvale: left, ore-moving tram; above, railroad section gang

Robert Morland Bird

there were marl mines at Twin Falls and at Marl Run in Old Buena Vista. Smallest of the villages, Marlbrook did not appear to have a post office, although it was home to the Marlbrook Lime Company from 1913 to 1931.



WITH THE coming of the railroad, commercial activity spread quickly in South River. Riverside was the main beneficiary of this growth. The village had three general stores, one owned and operated by J. P. Tribitt, another by W. E. Tribitt and the third by W. M. Showalter

Horton & Snead and W. G. McDowell's company were making and firing 18 thousand to 20 thousand bricks a day in their kilns, using newly developed technology. D. T. Shields operated a butcher shop and Isaac Swartz was a blacksmith. Agriculture, though, was paramount at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, S. P. Campbell operated an orchard of some 1,800 trees, and fruit and vegetables were canned in a factory owned by C. R. Jordan.

The railroad provided an opportunity to ship commercial volumes of crops, animals, wood and tanbark. For example:

- In 1889 Wesley and Decker contracted to sell a million feet of lumber to the New Buena Vista Company;
- A. M. Glasgow shipped 1,000 bushels of corn;
- In 1892, over a six-month period, Sutton & Wilmer shipped eighty-five carloads of tanbark, a raw material used by the Buena Vista Extract Company to produce compounds used in leathermaking;
- In 1889 Thomas Watts shipped five carloads of cattle;
- The Decker brothers shipped 30,000 bushels of wheat.

The railroad, however, did not bring unmitigated benefits. In the first ten years of operation some fifty

cows and horses were killed because the tracks were not properly fenced.

Most villages that developed in early Rockbridge County had a grist mill as the anchor business. Many believe the grist mill, still standing, at Old Buena Vista was built by Samuel Jordan in the 1840s. I question that: I think it dates to a much earlier time, based on the records of other businesses that operated before the '40s.

The furnace in Old Buena Vista was important to the entire South River. That furnace, the largest in the area, was expensive to construct and complicated to operate. It received ore from the Riverside area via a sluice that



Courtesy of Norfolk & Western Historical Society

Riverside benefited most from the coming of the railroad.

ran near the current tracks of the Norfolk & Western. Ore was loaded into vessels near Riverside, and from there it moved downstream to the furnace, where it was brought by tram from the sluice to the furnace. Water from the sluice then operated the bellows for the furnace before being discharged into the river.

A model of a furnace at the Miller's House Museum at Jordan's Point in Lexington demonstrates how the furnace operated.

The old Buena Vista furnace produced approximately five tons of iron a day until it was destroyed by General David Hunter's troops in the Civil War. The loss of this furnace marked the end of the iron processing in South River.



Remnants of Samuel F. Jordan's furnace at South River

Although iron declined in importance toward the end of the nineteenth century, the mining of manganese continued until 1914, and the mining of marl until 1931. The loss of these two businesses struck a blow to South River and ended the mineral extraction industry there.

The year 1915, however, saw an industry shift with the coming of the South River Lumber Company at Cornwall.

Whitmer & Steele Lumber Company of Pennsylvania, having exhausted the supply of lumber in its homestate holdings, began buying up land in Rockbridge, Amherst and Nelson counties. The first purchase was of land owned by the Buena Vista Extract Company. This land, several thousand acres, had been a source of tanbark. Whitmer & Steele purchased other land from local owners as well. Deed books in the Rockbridge County Clerk's office have four pages just listing the names of sellers whose land the company purchased. Not surprisingly many are in the name of Clark. These purchases — which were combined to form the South River Lumber Company, which was incorporated on March 27, 1916 — made it the owner of some 100 square miles of land on both sides of South Mountain.

To bring the logs to its mill in Cornwall, the company built a 60-mile railroad that had as many as five locomotives in operation at a time. White's Run was dammed to

serve as a log pond for the mill. Initially the mill was staffed by workers from the Pennsylvania plant, and the company constructed two boarding houses and 18 homes for the workmen and their families, as well as a school and a general store.

But in 1938, with its last cutting occurring at Crabtree Falls in neighboring Nelson County, South River Lumber Company ceased operations.¹

SOUTH RIVER and its villages began a slow commercial decline. Like Denmark, Alone Mill, Natural Bridge Station, Collierstown, Rapps Mill, Brownsburg, Zack and numerous others, it is one more of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century communities in Rockbridge County where commercial activity no longer exists and where the communities themselves have shrunk considerably.

¹ See "The South River Lumber Company of Cornwall, Virginia," by Horace D. Douty, son of one of the first lumbermen to come from Pennsylvania, in *Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society XIII*, 2009, pp. 45 ff.

THANKS

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