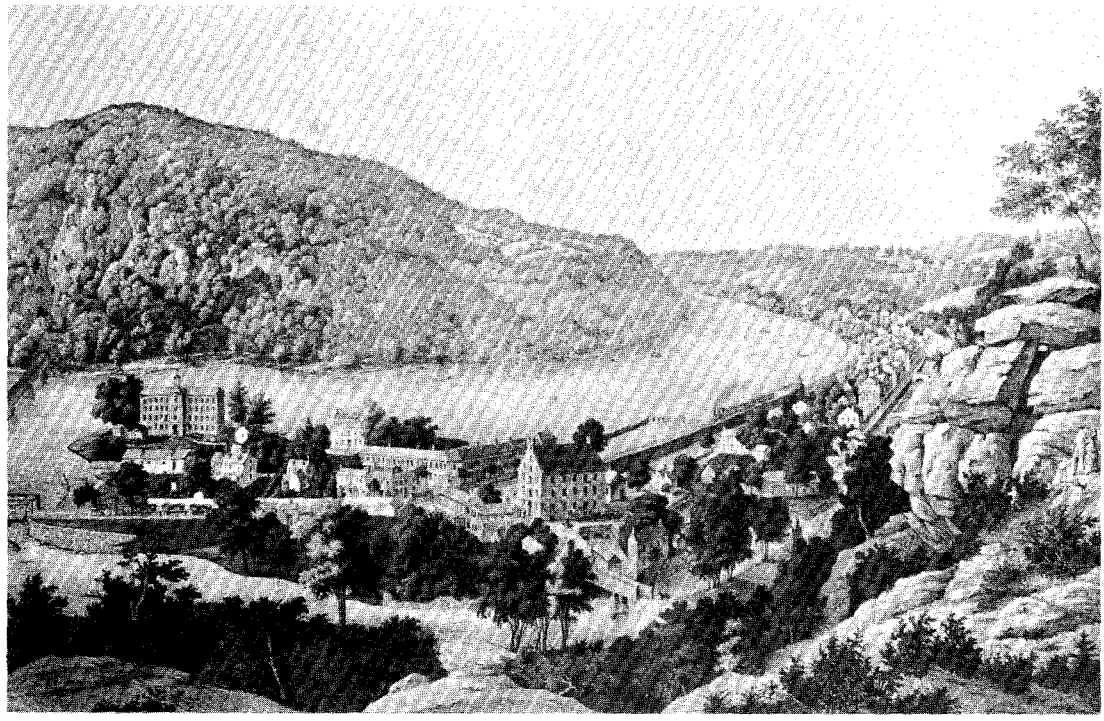


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SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF VIRGINIUS ISLAND

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Harpers Ferry NHP ... Social & Economic History of Virginus Island

by
Frank B. Sarles, Jr.

DIVISION OF HISTORY
Office Of Archeology & Historic Preservation

June 20, 1969



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

National Park Service

Washington, D.C.

Harpers Ferry National Historical Park

* * *

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FOREWORD

This study of the Social and Economic History of Virginius Island has been prepared in accordance with the Historical Resource Study Proposal, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park-H-13. It is a distillation of the valuable information contained in studies previously done by three National Park Service historians and one archeologist.

Although the content of this report has no connection with the John Brown raid, the year 1859 was a natural temporal focal point, for it was during the period 1846 to the Civil War that Virginius Island reached the zenith of its social and economic importance. Consequently the discussion of man's works on the island that follows the narrative portion of this report concentrates on those standing in 1859.

My thanks go to the Superintendent and staff of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, who assisted me with unfailing courtesy; to Historian Charles W. Snell, of the Division of History, who answered some critical questions; and to Mrs. Maxine S. Gresham, who typed the final manuscript.

Frank B. Sarles, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The low bench of land bordering the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers just above their confluence at Harpers Ferry was ideally suited for the accommodation of water-powered industries. The United States Armory was established on the narrow shelf on the Potomac side, while the somewhat wider bench along the Shenandoah - channeled by the river into several small islands - ultimately contained a diverse group of industries. Establishment of the Government-sponsored Hall's Rifle Factory on the two upper islands gave to them the names, Upper and Lower Hall's Island. Virginius Island, downstream from the rifle factory, was privately developed and at its zenith included a number of industrial firms and a population of more than 200 persons.

The proximity to water that made Virginius Island so desirable for industrial development ultimately proved its downfall. Periodic flooding eventually drove industry away, destroyed most surface traces of man's works, and left Virginius Island the picturesque ruin we see today.

EARLY HISTORY OF VIRGINIUS ISLAND

The early ownership of the island that came to be called Virginius is clouded with uncertainty. It probably was included in the 1751 patent from Lord Fairfax to Robert Harper, who in turn willed it to his nephew, Robert Griffith.¹ On January 9, 1797, Griffith's son conveyed the Harper legacy to a group headed by Messrs. Rutherford and Darke, but -- although the deed of conveyance expressed an intent to include the island -- the bounds given did not encompass it. Similarly, the island was not mentioned when, on February 20 of the same year, this group conveyed the property to the United States.²

In 1816, a patent was issued by the State of Virginia to Daniel McPherson, Surveyor of Jefferson County, for Virginius Island on the basis of its being unclaimed land. On May 19, 1817, McPherson sold the island to John Peacher for \$1,000. Peacher in

1. Charles W. Snell, "A History of the Island of Virginius, 1751 to 1870" (MS report, National Park Service, December 4, 1958), p. 6. The fact that no mention is made of the island in the original patent perhaps indicates that it had not yet been formed. It is mentioned in Harper's will in 1782.

2. Ibid. In 1842 the Commanding Officer of the Armory, Major Henry K. Craig, prevailed upon his superiors to investigate the possible validity of a claim of the Federal Government to Virginius Island. A resurvey of the Government boundaries indicated that at least the northern half of Virginius Island was included in the 1751 patent. Because of subsequent events, however, and the fact that considerable private investment had been made in the island, the Government decided not to prosecute its claim. Ibid., pp. 6-8.

turn -- in deeds dated August 30, 1823, and August 30, 1824 --
sold the island to James Stubblefield for a total of \$15,000.01.³
The same year Stubblefield sold the island in four separate
tracts for a total of \$28,500. They were to remain under separate
ownerships until 1855, when the entire island was purchased by
one individual.⁴

The fifteen-fold increase in the value of Virginius Island
between 1817 and 1824 indicates that much development had taken
place under Peacher's and Stubblefield's proprietorships -- and
indeed a number of physical improvements were enumerated in the
1824 deeds. So much of a community had developed there that, on
January 8, 1827, the Virginia General Assembly acted favorably on
a petition of the inhabitants and established the town of
Virginius. By 1834, the island boasted 33 buildings, including a
tannery, a flour mill, a sawmill, and two blacksmith shops.⁵ This
was only a beginning, for major transportation developments were
in the offing.

3. Ibid., pp. 10-11. Although Stubblefield was Superintendent
of the Armory, his purchase of Virginius Island was a personal venture.
The first deed, for thirty perches of land, transferred title to
Stubblefield for one cent.

4. Ibid., pp. 13, 116.

5. Ibid., pp. 15, 16, 34-37. The town apparently ceased to
exist as a separate entity sometime after 1840.

THE COMING OF TRANSPORTATION

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, limited improvements along the lower Shenandoah made it navigable for commercial traffic, thus allowing the produce of the Shenandoah Valley to be carried to Georgetown and Washington. Navigation continued to be difficult, however, and transportation costs were heavy.¹ Consequently, it was not until the coming of the canals and the railroads in the 1830s that Harpers Ferry began to realize its commercial potential.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal was the first to come. From its starting point at Georgetown, the canal reached Harpers Ferry in November 1833. Completion of the canal meant much to the industrial establishments on Virginus Island, as freight rates were cut sharply for goods shipped eastward.² Though the canal was not destined to reach its terminus at Cumberland for another 17 years, it had signaled the beginning of a prosperous period for the entrepreneurs of Virginus Island.

1. William C. Everhart, "A History of Harpers Ferry" (MS report, National Park Service, November 1952), p. 12; Philip R. Smith, Jr., "History of the Lower Hall Island, 1796-1848, and Captain John H. Hall's Rifle Factory, 1819-1845" (MS report, National Park Service, May 27, 1959), p. 2.

2. Everhart, pp. 22-23. Whereas a barrel of flour had previously cost up to one dollar to transport to Georgetown by wagon or by river, it now cost only 40 cents by canal.

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, originating at Baltimore and bypassing Washington, reached the north bank of the Potomac opposite Harpers Ferry late in 1834, and on December 1 the first official train reached that point after a six-hour trip from Baltimore. For another two years the Potomac River separated the people of Harpers Ferry from the railhead on the north shore, and not until 1836 -- though the rails meantime had been extended westward from Harpers Ferry -- could they board a train for Baltimore at the Harpers Ferry station.³

While the canal and the B&O railroad opened new horizons for the manufacturers of Virginius Island, they were most intimately affected by construction of the Winchester and Potomac Railroad. This line, aimed at providing rail transport for the lower Shenandoah Valley, began building overland from Winchester in 1833. The track reached Halltown, 4 miles from Harpers Ferry, in November 1835, and the grand opening of the entire line from Winchester to a junction with the B&O at Harpers Ferry occurred on March 31, 1836.⁴

3. Ibid. pp. 24-25. The railroad reached Cumberland in 1842 and its western terminus at Wheeling, on the Ohio River, in 1853.

4. Snell, p. 59.

The Winchester and Potomac passed through Virginus Island, its east-west right-of-way traversing three of the four tracts, mostly on trestlework that kept it above ground level. From 1835 until 1847, the railroad owned one of the tracts, located near the east end of Virginus Island, on which it erected a ⁵ depot for the convenience of the islanders.

5. Everhart, p. 27; Snell, pp. 58-60, 83.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRY

The coming of the railroad brought a rapid increase in the industrial development of Virginus Island, a development that reached its zenith in the decade that witnessed John Brown's raid and the ensuing dissolution of the Union. A beginning toward consolidation of the island's industries was made earlier -- in 1846 -- by a corporation known as the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company. This firm built two large cotton factories at the east end of the island, one of which was in full production by March 1848. It also constructed a dam and river wall to utilize the Shenandoah's flow most efficiently. The firm soon had financial problems, however, and in January 1853 -- after one of the factories had been swept away by floodwaters -- a court-ordered public auction was held to settle the outstanding debts. The property consisted of nearly a score of buildings, including the remaining factory, a sawmill, a machine shop, and a number of dwellings, which covered about one-half of the island.¹

The demise of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company paved the way for the final consolidation of ownership of

1. Snell, pp. 85-103, 114.

Virginus Island. Abraham H. Herr first appeared on the scene on March 2, 1844, when he and his brother, John, purchased the flour mill comprising the island's major industry. Four years later, Abraham bought his brother's interest and continued to operate the mill himself. In July 1854, Herr bought the former holdings of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company for \$25,000, receiving the deed on February 14, 1859, when he made the final payment. During 1855² he purchased the remaining portions of Virginus Island.

When John Brown came to Harpers Ferry, 37 buildings were standing on Virginus Island. They included a 4-story cotton factory, a 3 1/2-story flour mill, a 3-story machine shop, a 1 1/2-story sawmill, an iron foundry, a blacksmith shop, a chopping mill, about 25 dwellings, and several miscellaneous³ structures.

Although some of Brown's raiders seized a building at nearby Hall's Rifle Factory, Virginus Island was undisturbed. Less than two years later, however, the marching of the armies heralded the end of the island's industrial boom.

2. Snell, pp. 56, 82, 115-17.

3. Snell, pp. 122-25.

THE DECLINE OF VIRGINIUS ISLAND

Abraham Herr was a Pennsylvanian by birth and loyal to the United States, and he suffered accordingly when the Confederate forces occupied Harpers Ferry. Early in 1861 he was arrested and imprisoned briefly in Richmond, where he was soon released on parole. The following October, with Harpers Ferry temporarily unoccupied by either army, Herr invited the Union commander across the Potomac to remove for the use of his troops a large stock of grain stored at his mill. While they were doing so, a Confederate force under Col. Turner Ashby made an unsuccessful attack on the town. A few days later, a Confederate raiding party, in retaliation, burned Herr's mill to the ground. Although most of the other buildings on Virginius Island survived the war, industrial activity came to a halt until well after Appomattox.¹

Hope for a dispersion of the economic paralysis that gripped the Harpers Ferry area after the Civil War was raised when, on July 24, 1867, Herr sold his Virginius Island holdings to the firm of Child & McCreight, of Springfield, Ohio. During the

1. Joseph Barry, *The Strange Story of Harper's Ferry* (4th printing, Shepherdstown, W. Va., 1964), pp. 67-69.

next three years, the new owners converted the cotton factory into a flour mill, with a capacity of 500 barrels of flour a day, and renovated most of the dwellings.²

Further impetus to the incipient boom appeared in 1869 when the Federal Government decided to dispose of its holdings in Harpers Ferry. Although the buildings had been mostly destroyed during the war, the real estate along the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers retained its industrial potential.

The public auction late in 1869 aroused much excitement in the community. A corporation, "The Harper's Ferry Manufacturing and Water Power Company," headed by Capt. F. C. Adams, bid in the old Armory grounds and the site of Hall's Rifle Works for \$206,000, and public confidence was so great that the Government lots and dwellings around the town were purchased for high prices by numerous individuals. Total receipts from the sale were nearly \$300,000.³

These anticipations were doomed to dismal failure. A combination of human chicanery and natural disaster spelled the final end to Virginius Island's role in American industry.

2. Snell, pp. 146-47.

3. Everhart, pp. 125-27.

Periodic floods had swept the island from the beginning of human occupation. The first one recorded, in 1748, drove Robert Harper from the cabin he was occupying, while another, five years later, was called the "pumpkin flood" from the large numbers of pumpkins washed downstream from Indian gardens.⁴ Other memorable floods occurred in 1810; in 1832; in 1843, one of the three floods in that year inflicting much damage on the Harpers Ferry end of the Winchester and Potomac Railroad; in 1846 and 1847; in 1852, when the railroad bridge from Virginus Island to the mainland washed away; and in 1859,⁵ 1860, and 1861.

But the most destructive flood of all to Virginus Island occurred just as the island's industry was recovering from the destruction of the Civil War. On September 30, 1870, after three days of rain, the Shenandoah began a rapid rise that soon swept away the bridges to maroon the residents of Virginus Island. By 9 o'clock that night, as the waters continued to rise, mainland residents began to fear for the lives of those isolated islanders. Although the water had begun to subside by the following morning, the flood continued to take a toll of buildings

4. Barry, p. 14.

5. Snell, pp. 73-75, 103-06, 120-21; Barry, pp. 35-36; Everhart, p. 31.

on Virginius Island, and the townspeople gathered on the hillside near Jefferson's Rock periodically heard and saw the disappearance of individual structures before the onslaught of the waters. John Wernwag, 76 years old, was seen to be swept away in the ruins of his house, and his neighbors gave him up for dead; they were overjoyed when he came back on the 8 p.m. train, having landed safely at Berlin, Maryland, six miles downstream. By that time, boat connection with the island had been re-established and the extent of damage could be assessed. Besides the washed-out bridges and railroad trestling, no less than 12 structures had been leveled to the ground, including the iron foundry, the sawmill, a carriage factory,⁶ the machine shop, and the school house. Most of the other buildings were damaged to a greater or lesser degree, losing dependencies, doors or blinds, partition walls, or even sections of outside wall or floors. The flour mill, miraculously, was undamaged, although the mill race was destroyed along with the mill office and all of Mr. McCreight's private papers. Virginius Island undoubtedly presented a picture of desolation, stripped even of most of its vegetation.⁷

6. This building apparently was erected between 1859 and 1861, since it does not appear on the list of buildings in 1859 (Snell, p. 125) but is stated by Barry to have been standing "before the war." (P. 146.)

7. Snell, pp. 133-35; Barry, pp. 151-64; Everhart, pp. 127-30.

The flour mill continued to operate after 1870, but it was the island's only industry. Although floods still periodically ravaged Virginus Island, the mill and a number of dwellings survived well into the twentieth century. A final devastating flood in 1936, which carried away the highway bridges across both rivers, finally swept Virginus Island clear of man's works, leaving only scattered mounds of debris⁸ to mark their sites.

8. Charles W. Snell, "A Short History of the Island of Virginus, 1816-1870," (MS report, National Park Service, June 1, 1959), pp. 45, 62.

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BUILDING NO. 1

Townsend Beckham purchased this property from James Stubblefield on December 28, 1824. When Beckham died some seven years later, he was the proprietor of an operating tannery and an oil mill which, due to a scarcity of flaxseed, had been inoperative for some time. The oil mill stood on this site.

Soon after Beckham's death in May 1832, the property was offered for rent, but by November 1833, the executors were trying to sell it. The tanning establishment consisted of a bark mill, a large number of vats, shops, bark houses, and "every other appurtenance to carry on the business on a most extensive scale."

No buyer was found for several years, and late in 1835 the oil mill was leased to Hugh Gilleece, who converted it to an iron foundry. There, announced Gilleece on November 12, he would soon be producing "Machine Castings, Mill Gearing, And Branding Irons. . . . Mouldboards of McCormick's patterns, from No. 6 to No. 12, right and left handed. . . . The Loudoun Mouldboards, right and left. . . . Wagon Boxes of all sizes, and Andirons of various patterns."

By the following April the firm was also producing "several of the most approved Threshing Machine Patterns, one of which is Richardson's Mammoth Machine. . . . Also, Plaster-Breakers, Corn-Shellers, Apple-Nuts, Wagon and Dearborn Boxes of all sizes. . . . Gudgeon Patterns."

Gilleece and William Apsey bought the property at a court sale in December 1838. Hugh Gilleece & Co. soon advertised the tannery for rent but continued to operate the iron foundry. In June 1840, Gilleece completed a chopping mill, where "CHOPPED CORN and RYE, will be kept constantly for sale on accommodating terms." The chopping mill occupied a part of the site of the former L-shaped oil mill.

Gilleece's iron foundry prospered greatly during the next few years. In 1842 he cast a 3,600-pound iron shaft for the U.S. Armory, and the enumerated list of products continued to grow. They included stone-coal grates, saws, turning lathes, flat irons, cast iron railing, mill spindles, and the "Great Western Cook Stove," adaptable for coal or wood cooking for small or large families.

In September 1854 Gilleece and Alexander Brown leased the property to Fontaine Beckham & Son, and on August 31, 1855, they sold it to Abraham H. Herr.

Although the foundry ceased to operate during the Civil War, the building survived the war and became the property of Child & McCreight in 1867. It was destroyed by the flood of 1870.

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 14, 18-19, 34, 41-49, 75, 81, 117, 134.

BUILDING NO. 2

On December 28, 1824, Fontaine Beckham purchased the property on which the famous "Island Mill" flour mill was to operate until the outbreak of the Civil War. Perhaps the mill had been constructed previous to Beckham's proprietorship; in any event, the building underwent "a thorough repair" in the summer of 1830.

Beckham put the Island Mill on the market in 1832, describing it as a "substantial" stone building, 60 by 40 feet, with two water wheels, two pairs of burrs, and a pair of country stones. Beckham failed to find a buyer until 1838, however, and meantime he rented the mill: to John H. King in 1833, to Jacob Staub in 1834 and 1835 and to Rowland, Heflebower & Co. in 1836 and 1837.

A court sale was held on May 1, 1838, at which the property was bought by Henry Rowland, Carter Williamson, and Samuel Heflebower. The new owners continued to operate the mill, which had a capacity of 150 barrels per day, but in February 1839 the building was destroyed by fire. The building, valued at \$20,000, was a complete loss, along with a reported 20,000 bushels of wheat valued at \$1.50 per bushel. The total loss of \$50,000 was reportedly covered by only \$7,000 to \$8,000 insurance. Although a later report lightened the loss somewhat, the firm apparently suffered a drastic setback.

Luther I. Cox was engaged to build a new flour mill on the site, in return for which he was permitted to buy a controlling interest in the property. On July 1, 1840, Cox sold his interest to Daniel Snyder and Benjamin Ford, who thus took over operation of the mill.

Within two years the new proprietors had run into financial difficulties, and a court-appointed trustee was administering the operation. For several months prior to the court sale on March 2, 1844, the mill was leased by Philip Coons.

The mill was purchased by John and Abraham Herr, who advertised themselves ready for business on July 18, 1844. John Herr sold his interest to his brother, Abraham, on January 24, 1848, and the latter continued as owner of the mill until it was destroyed in 1861.

Prior to July 1860, Herr entered into a partnership with James S. Welch and George W. Legg for operation of the Island Mill. On July 19, with the withdrawal of Legg, the firm was reconstituted as Herr & Welch, "sole manufacturers of James S. Welch's best Family Flour."

When the Civil War began, Herr's strong Union sympathies brought him much grief. First of all, he was arrested by the Confederates and taken to Richmond, where he was soon released on parole. Then, when the Federal troops occupied Harpers Ferry, they partially dismantled the machinery of the Island Mill to prevent

the Confederates from using it. Early in October 1861, Herr invited the Union troops to remove a large quantity of grain from his mill for their use. Shortly after that, a Confederate force burned Herr's mill to the ground in retaliation.

The Island Mill was never rebuilt, although its ruined walls continued to stand well into the twentieth century. During the flood of 1870, these walls by deflecting the strong current of the floodwaters were credited by Mrs. John C. Child with preserving the Child House (Building No. 22) from destruction.

* * *

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 13, 20-24, 37, 50-58, 82, 118, 128-29, 133, 136.

Barry, pp. 104, 116, 146-47.

BUILDING NO. 3

Lewis Wernwag, who purchased this property in December 1824, by February 1830 was operating a sawmill on this site. In 1832 he sold a half-interest in the property to Joseph L. Smith and James Hook, both of Frederick County, Maryland, and the sawmill operation continued as Joseph L. Smith & Co. The next year Smith bought out Hook and became the majority owner of the property, but in 1836 Smith declared bankruptcy and his two-thirds interest was sold to Jesse Schofield in 1844.

From March 1839 through July 1840 the sawmill was operated by Jesse Schofield and George Mauzy, and then Joseph P. Shannon replaced Mauzy until the end of November. Five years later -- in February 1845 -- the firm of Wernwag & Schofield announced their availability to saw wood at the following rates: "40 cents per 100 ft. board measure; 20 cents per 100 feet running, for shingling lathing and paling; or we will saw for the third log." In May 1845 the partners announced they had rented the sawmill, apparently to Nelson Faulkner.

When the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company was organized in 1846 the sawmill was included in its holdings. The company apparently rented the mill in preference to undertaking its operation. In April 1850 the operator was A. S. Ruddock,

who advertised the sale of up to 50,000 feet of kiln-dried pine plank as well as a large quantity of unsawed timber ranging up to two feet thick and 60 feet long. In April 1851, when the mill was again advertised for rent, it was described as having a circular saw and a set of lathe saws attached, with a capacity for cutting lumber up to 60 feet long. The mill building was 36 by 100 feet, of weatherboard construction, with an iron water wheel.

The sawmill was sold along with the other holdings of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company in January 1853, and in July 1854 it came into the ownership of Abraham H. Herr. The building survived the Civil War only to be destroyed in the flood of September 30, 1870.

* * *

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 26, 29-33, 37, 61-65, 72, 84, 89-90, 98-100, 116, 134.

BUILDING NO. 4

Prior to 1830, Lewis Wernwag built a machine shop here, which was apparently leased to Charles Mills. Mills advertised in the Virginia Free Press on February 17, 1830, that he was prepared to "execute all kinds of TURNING, in wood, iron, brass, &c.," and also to "make or repair any kind of Machinery which may be wanted, strictly according to direction, turning lathes, &c. &c." The operation soon became more diversified, for by May 1833 it included "Turning Lathes, Screw Plates, Stocks, Taps and Dies, Bench Screws of wood or iron, Mill Screws, &c. &c."

The Wernwag family operated the machine shop from 1835 to about August 1843, and from then until the end of 1844 it was operated by John Wernwag and Joseph P. Shannon. Further diversification appeared in the form of saws and "Farham's Patent Washing Machines."

The machine shop in 1847 became the property of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company. Wernwag leased the building in 1850 and apparently continued to occupy it during subsequent ownerships. When in December 1852 the court sale of the company's property was advertised, the machine shop was described as a three-story stone building, 30 by 50 feet in horizontal dimensions, "leased and occupied."

The structure passed into possession of Abraham H. Herr in 1854 and survived four years of war to become the property of Child & McCreight in 1867. Then, in common with all the island industries except the flour mill, it was swept away in the flood of 1870. It was the roof of this building, occupied as a business and dwelling by John Wernwag, on which Wernwag sailed majestically downstream, only to reappear "from the dead" on the night train.

* * *

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 25-26, 30-31, 33, 37, 65, 72, 77, 99, 102, 108, 122, 134.

Barry, pp. 158ff.

BUILDING NO. 5

On March 11, 1848, the Virginia Free Press reported plans by the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company to build a paper factory adjacent to their new cotton factory on Virginius Island. Economic considerations brought a change of plan, and the building when completed in July 1849 was a second cotton factory.

Also of brick and four stories high, it was smaller than its predecessor, measuring 60 by 49 feet in horizontal dimensions. Its cotton machinery included seven carders, four spinning frames, and two reels, and it had a capacity of 400 pounds of cotton yarn, 1,100 pounds of batting, and 50 pounds of candle wick per day. The machinery was manufactured by Charles Duffield, of Paterson, New Jersey, and many of the mill hands were experienced workers from England.

When on April 8, 1852, the financially ailing company advertised the sale of its assets, Building No. 5 was one of the major components. Apparently the devastating flood 10 days later destroyed this building, for it was omitted from the advertisement of December 9, 1852, announcing the court sale of the entire holdings of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company.

* * *

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 94, 97, 100, 103.

BUILDING NO. 6

On January 15, 1846, the Virginia Legislature issued a charter for incorporation of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company, with an authorized capital stock of \$300,000. The company was formally organized at a meeting of stockholders on June 23, when James Giddings was elected president.

On July 16, Giddings advertised for bids to construct a four-story brick cotton factory, 100 by 45 feet in horizontal dimensions. A formal ceremony for laying of the cornerstone was held on October 22, by which time the stone foundation of the structure had been finished. The building was completed and production of cotton cloth began in the winter of 1847-48. An advertisement in the Charlestown Virginia Free Press on March 11, 1848, announced the availability of yard-wide sheeting and shirtings "at less than Baltimore prices."

Although the company soon began to experience financial difficulties, its optimistic officers borrowed \$10,000 and built a second cotton factory (Building No. 5), which began operation in July 1849.

The company in the following year built a dam across the Shenandoah River and constructed an extensive river wall to

channel water power to its factories. This venture brought it into controversy with the Federal Government when backwater from the dam adversely affected the water wheels of the rifle factory on Hall's Island. A Federal lawsuit forced the company to modify its new dam.

Continuing financial troubles led the stockholders into a decision to sell the company holdings, which were advertised on April 8, 1852. The Jefferson County Circuit Superior Court intervened to present the sale at that time, but ordered a court sale to be held on January 22, 1853. By the time the sale was held, the second cotton factory was gone, presumably destroyed in the great flood of April 18, 1852, but this structure survived unscathed.

At a public auction on January 22, 1853, the property of the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company was sold to W. C. Worthington for \$50,000. Worthington did not retain possession, however, and a second sale was held on July 21, 1854, at which Abraham H. Herr, proprietor of the "Island Mill," became the owner. Herr apparently leased the cotton factory instead of operating it himself; in December 1856, Messrs. Cramer & Hawks advertised brown cottons they had manufactured.

Presumably the cotton factory continued to operate until the outbreak of the Civil War when, in common with all the other

industries on Virginius Island, it ceased production. The structure survived the war, however, and in July 1867 it was sold by Herr to the firm of Child & McCreight, of Springfield, Ohio.

The new owners hired an expert machinist, William F. Cochran, and a crew of workers to convert the cotton factory into a flour mill. In the next 15 months they installed four turbine wheels of 300-horsepower capacity and ten run of buhrs with a capacity of 500 barrels of flour per day. In 1869 the partners entered into an agreement with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company, new owners of the former Winchester and Potomac line, for a spur line to the flour mill.

Scarcely had the mill begun full operation when it was threatened by the great flood of September 30, 1870. Of all the industries on the island, only this building survived, although the destruction of the mill race kept it out of operation for some time.

In 1884, Thomas Savery purchased the Upper and Lower Hall Islands, just above Virginius, and erected a pulp mill. Three years later Child & McCreight filed suit against Savery, charging he had built a dam that restricted the water flow to their flour mill. Before the suit could be resolved, the flood of May 1889 drove the flour manufacturers into bankruptcy. Savery probably acquired

title to the flour mill, for in the mid-1890s he was reported as salvaging the contents of the building. Building No. 6 continued to stand until the great flood of 1936, which swept it away along with the other surface vestiges of man's sojourn on Virginius Island.

Archeological excavation of Building No. 6 began in the summer of 1966 and revealed a number of interesting facts about the structure and its operation.

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References

Snell, "History," pp. 86-87, 89-90, 93-98, 100-02, 110, 114-16, 118, 129, 132, 147.

David Hardgrave Hannah, "Archeological Excavations on Virginius Island, Harpers Ferry National Historic Park, 1966-1968" (MS report, National Park Service, March 1969), pp. 6 passim, 83-87.

BUILDINGS 7 & 8

Two small structures were built side by side here sometime prior to 1835. One of them was a small frame dwelling and the other a smith shop.

Lewis Wernwag, who purchased this property in 1824 and probably built both structures, operated the smith shop until May 1835, when he rented it to William Richards. The Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company took over ownership of the structures in 1846 but apparently rented the smith shop, for George Wissinger advertised for a journeyman blacksmith in August 1847.

These buildings were still standing in 1865, but they had disappeared by 1900. In all probability they were destroyed in the great floods of 1870 or 1889.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 61, 72, 90, 158, 163.

Hannah, p. 93.

BUILDINGS NO. 9 & 10

These two structures were standing between the sawmill and the cotton factory in 1859. Building No. 9 was a small frame office for the sawmill, one story high, while No. 10 probably was a 1 1/2-story frame dwelling house. Both apparently were built after 1848, though one or both may have been moved from other sites on Virginus Island. It is not known when these structures were destroyed, though both had disappeared by 1896.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 61, 72, 77, 90, 123, 164.

BUILDINGS NO. 11, 12, 13 & 14

The three dwelling houses (Buildings No. 12, 13 and 14), of brick-filled frame construction, were built prior to 1834 and were standing at the time of John Brown's raid. Buildings No. 12 and 13, south of the Winchester and Potomac tracks, survived the Civil War, but Building No. 14 did not. It is not known when the two former buildings were destroyed.

Apparently Building No. 12 was a 3 1/2-story structure, No. 13 was 2 1/2 stories, and No. 14 was two stories. No. 14 originally stood partially on the right-of-way of the railroad, but a portion of the L-shaped structure was cut off and the remainder moved slightly north to clear the tracks. Building No. 13 had an ell built onto its northwest corner between 1835 and 1844.

Building No. 11 was apparently a small carriage house, erected sometime prior to 1844. It still stood in 1865.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 76-77, 108, 123, 158-59.

BUILDINGS NO. 15, 16, 36, & 0

James Stubblefield sold this property to Edward Wager in 1824, and Wager probably constructed Buildings No. 15 and 16 before he sold the property to John Gildea in 1833. Both houses were two-story, of stone stuccoed construction, Building No. 15 being a two-family dwelling.

On May 13, 1835, the Winchester and Potomac Railroad Company bought the property from Gildea. Sometime before the following April the railroad company built a depot (Building 0) across the tracks from the two existing dwellings. The company removed the depot during the first half of 1847 and on July 1 sold all except their track right-of-way.

Sometime after 1848, Building No. 36 was constructed adjacent to the west end of Building No. 16. This new dwelling was of brick, two stories in height and with a triangular ground plan.

Buildings No. 15, 16 and 36 survived until at least 1913. They possibly were destroyed in the great flood of 1936.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 14, 37, 58-60, 76, 83, 109, 123-24, 136.

BUILDINGS NO. 17-21, 33-35

In 1859 this block of eight row houses, of brick construction and two stories high, was a conspicuous feature of Virginus Island. The first of the houses was built prior to 1835, and the last after 1848. They were occupied principally as quarters by the workmen at the various industries on Virginus Island.

When the flood of 1870 struck, the tenants of these houses moved their furniture and household goods upstairs and then evacuated their homes. Some of them took shelter in the Child House (Building No. 22) and others went on to Camp Hill. All of these houses survived the flood, but their kitchens and out-houses were carried away, doors and blinds torn off their hinges, and staircases and floors badly damaged. In addition, two of the houses suffered the collapse of their front walls.

Despite the flood damage they sustained, these houses were repaired and still stood in 1913. Probably they were finally destroyed in the flood of 1936.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 76-78, 109, 123-24, 136.

BUILDING NO. 22

Fontaine Beckham built a dwelling house on this site some-time prior to 1834. It was of stone, two stories high.

When, in 1867, Abraham H. Herr sold Virginus Island to the firm of Child & McCreight, Jonathan C. Child made his home in this building. When the great flood of 1870 struck, three other families took refuge with the Childs and so survived the danger. Mrs. Child left a vivid description of their ordeal:

Last Friday [September 30] towards evening the water commenced rising rapidly. Before two hours every way of escape . . . was cut off from us. So we were compelled to stay within the crumbling walls which sheltered us from the terrible water which seethed and dashed around us. . . .

As soon as we saw there was danger of the water coming into the house we commenced to tear up carpets and moving furniture upstairs but . . . we were compelled to leave some and some was overlooked so though we saved the bulk of our furniture, still we lost many indispensable [sic] and some valuable articles. . . .

Our house is considered the strongest residence on the Island and yet everyone thinks if it had not been for the walls of the old mill which stands west of us, it would have been swept away like chaff before the wind as was our stable and a brick house standing in our yard [Building No. 32]. Our back kitchen and all our outhouses and many trees are entirely gone so completely that we can scarcely realize they stood there. . . . Three families took refuge with us. . . .

Mrs. McCreight and children are going to start for Springfield (Ohio) this week to spend the winter . . . so I shall be left here all alone in this desolate place. . . . I suppose we are assuming some risk in staying here but our things are here in confusion, our doors are off

the hinges and down the river, so that we could not shut up the house. . . .

We have had to do all our cooking by a fireplace upstairs until yesterday and now have to cook down and eat upstairs as it is too damp to eat downstairs.

The Child house was still standing in 1913. It probably was destroyed in one of the Shenandoah floods, most likely in 1936.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 58, 124, 133-34, 136.

BUILDING NO. 23

This small building, probably a frame dwelling house, was standing in 1835. It still stood in 1859 but was destroyed sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 37, 76, 109, 124, 126.

BUILDINGS NO. 24, 25 & 38

Three small buildings, dwellings or outbuildings, stood in a group here in 1859. Buildings No. 24 and 25 probably were built by Townsend Beckham prior to 1832, while Building No. 38 was a 1 1/2-story gingerbread-trimmed frame building constructed after 1848. At least two of the buildings survived the Civil War, but all had disappeared by the 1870s, presumably swept away in the 1870 flood.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 34-37, 50, 75, 107, 124-25, 159, 161.

BUILDING NO. 26

In June 1840, Hugh Gilleece announced completion of a chopping mill on this site, "where he is prepared to chop Rye and Corn, for those who may think proper to favour him with a fall." This building was apparently erected on the site of a part of the former oil mill built by Townsend Beckham some-time after 1824 (Building No. 1). Besides grain, Gilleece also offered to grind plaster for local farmers "at the shortest possible notice and on reasonable terms, as he intends keeping his mill grinding during the ensuing Spring."

The chopping mill, whether operative or not, was still standing in 1859 but may not have survived the Civil War. In any event, it had disappeared by the 1870s.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 46-47, 75, 107, 117, 124, 159, 161.

BUILDINGS NO. 27 & 28

Building No. 27 was one of two "commodious Dwelling Houses" built by Townsend Beckham between 1824 and his death in 1832. It was two stories in height, apparently of brick construction. The house was standing in 1859 but appears to have been destroyed by the 1870s, possibly in the great flood of 1870. Building No. 28 was a carriage house, apparently built after 1848 and also gone by the 1870s.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 34, 50, 75, 107, 121, 124, 161.

BUILDINGS NO. 29, 30 & 31

All three of these buildings were constructed after 1848 and appear to have been destroyed by the 1870s, possibly in the 1870 flood. Building No. 29 was a two-story dwelling house, probably of brick construction; Building No. 30 was a one-story frame building, probably a shed; and Building No. 31 also was a one-story frame structure, probably a carriage house.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 121, 124, 161.

BUILDING NO. 32

This structure was a two-story brick dwelling house, built sometime after 1848 and abutting Building No. 22. It was destroyed in the flood of 1870. Another building apparently was erected on its foundations, however, for the site was occupied in 1913. This building probably was destroyed in the flood of 1936.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 124, 133, 136.

BUILDING NO. 37

This building was a small frame dwelling or storage house, built sometime between 1848 and 1859. It survived the Civil War but apparently had been destroyed by 1900.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 124, 127, 158, 163.

WINCHESTER AND POTOMAC RAILROAD

The Winchester and Potomac right-of-way across Virginius Island has followed its present alignment since its construction in the early 1830s. The portion of track from Halltown to Harpers Ferry, including this stretch, was laid between November 1835 and March 1836. During the height of its industrial importance, Virginius Island had several sets of tracks on this right-of-way, and in 1869 the firm of Child & McCreight entered into a contract with the Baltimore and Ohio -- new owners of the Winchester and Potomac line -- for a spur track to Building No. 6, newly converted into a flour mill. Various of the floods through the years since 1836 have damaged the rail line with its trestles and embankments, but each time it has been repaired and put back into service.

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References:

Snell, "History," pp. 59, 105, 129, 158.
Barry, pp. 151ff.

1850 RIVER WALL

In 1850 the Harpers Ferry & Shenandoah Manufacturing Company, to secure the extensive water power needed to operate its various manufactories, built a dam and river wall in this area. The dam extended diagonally across the river from a point some 220 yards west of the lockgate. From its inner end, the river wall extended eastward along the south side of Virginius Island. The arches are the remaining portion of the lockgate, which controlled the flow of water from the outer basin, to the west, into the inner basin to the east. The great flood of 1870 damaged the mill race for Building No. 6 and probably affected the river wall to some extent. The flood of 1889, which drove Child & McCreight into bankruptcy, undoubtedly caused great damage to the water conduit. The dam was gone by 1896.

* * *

References:

Snell, "History," pp. 99, 112, 126, 160, 164.

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