

LIFE IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY ROCKBRIDGE BATHS

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From the mid-1800's until the turn of the century Rockbridge Baths was a flourishing, bustling community. All phases of life -- economic, intellectual, religious and especially social -- witnessed unprecedented success. It is the aim of this paper to examine and describe these phases.

I

In 1843 only one building, a small cabin, stood on the north side of North River * which flowed through an area known as the Cedar Grove and Strickler's or Letcher's Springs Country. Yet, a few people would occasionally spend part of their summers at this cabin for pleasure and recuperation of health. The attraction was a thermal pool fed by bubbling springs. Rockbridge Baths owes its name and notoriety to this watering place which supposedly possessed curative powers. ¹

A hotel to accommodate bathers was built in the 1850's. According to W. Cole Davis in an address to the Rockbridge Historical Society, the name Rockbridge Baths was first used in 1857 as it became associated with the hotel that was incorporated into "The Rockbridge Baths Company" around 1857. ²

For a brief time previously, the Baths had been known as Jordan's Springs after William Jordan who built rows of cottages for summer

*Today, the Maury River

visitors at the pool. ³ Ostensibly, Jordan's Springs existed for about one year, 1856. ⁴ Yet, a copy of a letter addressed to Jordan's Springs in 1862 suggests that common usage of the name Rockbridge Baths did not occur until sometime after 1862. ⁵

In 1868 a hotel brochure described Rockbridge Baths as a place nestled in a valley two miles wide and two and one-half miles long between Buncomb and Marble Mountains on the east and Hogback and Jump Mountains on the west. According to the advertisement, the valley was "laid off into small and well-cultivated farms, interspersed with neat farmhouses, and thickly settled by a population kind, hospitable, moral, industrial and intelligent." ⁶

Fertile lands made farming lucrative. In 1873 the Rockbridge Citizen reported Baths farmland selling for one hundred dollars per acre. ⁷ Twenty-five years later, the Lexington Gazette credited Rockbridge Baths with some of the finest land in the valley, still valued at one hundred dollars per acre. The Gazette also stated that tobacco and corn crops were raised on farms that were well-kept with many outbuildings, suggesting a "thrifty, industrious and well-to-do population." ⁸

Descendants of the Scotch from Northern Ireland and the Germans from the Palatinate, the people of Rockbridge Baths did prosper. ⁹ In his History of Bethesda Church Elder John Horne reported that church members, initially settlers on small farms along the river, had built thirty-five new houses in the Baths between 1854 and 1884. Horne also stated that another forty homes in the area contained male heads who were not church members. ¹⁰

II

As the area of settlement expanded so did the Baths economy. Besides farming, a list of white voters in 1889 noted the following occupations of Baths residents: miller, blacksmith, undertaker, carpenter and shoemaker.¹¹ A letter to the editor of the Rockbridge County News in 1885 also provides information about the prosperity of the Baths. The correspondent, Nebuchadnezzar, scolded the paper for neglecting news about Rockbridge Baths. In his complaint, he cited these evidences of a self-supporting community: a flourmill, sawmill, two cabinet shops, two blacksmith shops, a shoeshop, one store, and a good postmaster and wife with a millinery shop.¹²

Other businesses at the Baths, unlisted by Nebuchadnezzar, included a pottery, tailor and cooper shop. An optimist, Nebuchadnezzar believed that his village of about one hundred citizens would soon be incorporated into a town.¹³

The Baths never became a town although ~~she~~^{it} boasted valuable mineral deposits for some time. A marble quarry of superior quality was opened on the farm of J.A. Logan near Rockbridge Baths in 1867.¹⁴ On July 30, 1873 the Rockbridge Citizen reported the following:

A correspondent of The State Journal writing from the Rockbridge Baths, says that among the handsome farms in that section which show thrift and comfort are those of Joseph M. Adams, Dr. McCorkle, and the Philadelphia Marble Co. This company has bought a fine farm, bordering on the North River, on which is found quarries of very beautiful translucent marble, with a view of working it out for the market. Hays Creek comes rushing down from the mountain gorges from the North and joins North River at this place; and on its banks are also found one of the marble quarries near here of fine quality.¹⁵

Of much greater fame than the marble deposits were the two iron works of Rockbridge Baths. The Lebanon Valley Forge, whose products aided the Confederacy during the Civil War, stood directly across the North River from Bethesda Church. "The hammer, which must have weighed seven hundred pounds, marked the forge's location years after the river had washed all other vestiges away. About 1894 Dr. Samuel Brown Morrison placed the hammer in his front yard. Dr. Morrison's grandson, Robert Steel Hutcheson, finally gave it for scrap during World War II. As Bernard Bangley stated, 'the Lebanon Valley Forge helped the United States during two wars.'"

The Gibraltar Forge can be claimed by the Baths even though its site rested on the Davis farm one mile south of the village. This forge made the hearths, fireplace bricks, nails and spikes for the Davis house.

After 1850 the iron ore forges declined as anthracite and ore replaced the charcoal furnaces. Most furnaces lasted through the Civil War and then closed permanently.¹⁶

Like the iron works, the gristmill at Rockbridge Baths contributed to the Civil War by making flour for the Confederate Army. The flour was shipped by packet boat down the North River to the James River to Richmond.¹⁷

Besides making flour, the mill, operated by William Foutz, ground rye, oats and corn into meal for bread, feed and use at local distilleries.¹⁸ Prices for these products varied little between 1856 and 1873. The Foutz Mill Ledgers from March 29, 1856 through November 1, 1873 showed the following changes:

