

By Michael Wentzel and Michael Shultz

The River You drink - II

The Gunpowder Served Man as Power Source for Varied Mills

The history of the Gunpowder River system is bound up in a lost town and forgotten people and drowned mills that are no more. Its settlers predate the white man by thousands of years and it has known hope and anger and renewal and wars. Nobody even knows for sure how it got its name. This is the second installment in a five part series by Michael Shultz and Michael Wentzel on the Gunpowder River.

The Indians must have liked it here in this cave mouth under a jutting rock ledge, 50 feet above the sweeping bend in the big gunpowder falls. The winter sun struck the rock face and warmed the south-facing pocket.

There was ice in the river below, big sheets in the slow moving currents of the bends and a flurry in the faster water. A grove of young pines upstream on the opposite bank added the only green touch to the scene of gray and silver bark, brown leaves, and dark, cold rocks and water. Ages ago, when man was discovering this piece of earth, he found the caves like this. With rudimentary tools he'd cut trees, and drive the poles across the cave opening, closing off the front and making a home. Now the shelf of rocks had slipped and the back of the cave, except for an opening smaller than a man could crawl through, was closed. Martin Larrabee, an avid hiker of the area in Herford, remembered when a companion had knelt here and "picked up the only thing I've ever seen just picked from the ground that I knew was an arrow head." The river murmured below. The sun warmed the rocks. The canoe should have come, sliding on the current, downstream from out of time.

Early in November, 1605, a group of Englishmen decided they would blow up Parliament, an act which may have christened a colonial river. Or maybe not. But that's one version of how a name came to be. The 12605 scheme was known as the Gunpowder Plot, and the Reverend J. Alphonse Frederick speculated in 1914 that the scheme lent its name to Bid and Little Gunpowder Falls and Gunpowder River to Baltimore county.

Mr. Frederick suggested that an early settler named Captain Winter, who landed in Baltimore county in 1638, was related to, or perhaps was. Either Thomas or Robert Winter, two leaders of "the nefarious Gunpowder Plot." and that he named the Gunpowder River to commemorate the plan.

However, a folk tradition lays the name to innocence rather than cunning. Given a packet of gunpowder by early traders, the local Indians planted the black, round grains on the river bank, believing them to be seeds, the story goes. It is doubtful the Indians, who intimately know plants and animals, would mistake black powder for seeds. Their name for the water has vanished as well, although they lived along the banks of the river far longer than the white - and black - men who replaced them have even to now.

A less colorful story has it that the name came about because saltpeter, an ingredient of gunpowder, was found along the banks. But the most popular explanation is that the river was named for the powder mills founded along the river. However, the mills were not started until certainly after first appeared written down. Historians say. The first written record of the name is in a patent for an estate called Powdersby, issued in August 1658. The first written mention of a mill is in 1733, and powder mills are thought to have started after that, historians say.

Captain John Smith, who explored the bay in 1606, described sailing up a river in the general location of the Gunpowder until he came to a narrow, rocky place where his boats could go no further. He named that river Willoughby's River. Historians have wrangled for years about whether the river was the Gunpowder or the Bush, but in either case the name didn't stick.

Smith described the area as "barren," which meant he didn't see any people lining there. Today, archaeologists have found traces of what the Englishman missed. There were Indians living in the Gunpowder Valley 12,000 years ago, long before man had learned to domesticate animals and in an era when giant sloths and mastodons roamed the continent.

Joe McNamara, an archaeologist studying the area for the state Department of Natural Resources, says some of the oldest stone points in the eastern United States have been found near the river. "We want to make sure the sites aren't destroyed by park development and we hope to use the knowledge of the sites in the planning process," Mr. McNamara says.

Tyler Bastion, the state archaeologist, says there is little known about the early Indians who lived beside the river when the first white settlers came. He says the Indians might have been part of the Piscataway tribe of southern Maryland. Those Indians and the Susquehannocks, who had large villages in southern Pennsylvania, were at war. The Susquehannocks, described as giants by John Smith, apparently drove the other nations out. But Indians or not, the tidewater of Maryland's rivers offered fine plantations to the hardy. Europeans settled along the Gunpowder river estuary, mainly farming tobacco.

Joppa, which was located at the head of the estuary where the two falls, the feeder streams, join, was once the county seat and a major port. But even in its heyday it was little more than a frontier village of a few buildings. Behind the village was the forest, stretching away in vast encircling reaches. Charles Hewitt was one of the first white men to live in the forest, and he lived in fear, his cabin located along an Indian trail.

In 1697, he told Edward Boothby, clerk of the County Court, that the Indians had changed, they weren't friendly anymore. His complaint was recorded as a court document by the clerk. "When they move from their hunting quarters, the Indians usually pass that way to hunt being not above a dozen or fourteen men besides women and children," he said in a deposition now filed in the Hall of Records. "Their time of moving to their hunting quarters was in June from whence they returned not till September, and then in companies as they went laden with their pelt."

But now the Indians were traveling in large groups, all men, who were armed and all painted, the settler said. Boothby, adding to the account, noted Hewitt's fears in the deposition. "The Indians for these three months past he has observed to be more insolent than in all the four years' time he has been seated before. Whilst he and his wife have been out at work or elsewhere about their occasions, they have been opened his doors, entered his house, opened his chest, taken away powder, lead, shot, and other things, forcibly in his absence, before his wife's face taken what ready provisions they could find, comes on the back of his plantation, gathers his green corn, cuts up his corn stalks, and gathers his

herbage planted for the use of his family without leave, comes into his house in companies all armed and usually painted all over, taking down his arms from the racks where they are hung, and viewing them with other gestures and postures unaccustomed. About a fortnight since 10 of them all armed and painted passed his plantation under pretense of going to Potomac to trade, everyone having a rumlet, containing about 3 or 4 gallons, some full of rum and other powder with some match coats. Although the Indians scared the white man, they did little violence and in the end the Indians disappeared. After 1700. the white men pushed farther into the forest The woods were needed to fuel industry and build houses and the game was diminished. By 1750, the Gunpowder was a hub of industry and the remaining Indians were enemies. Allied with the French in the French and Indian War. They were warded off by a series of log forts that stretched diagonally across the county, and by a troop of rangers.

Joppa, a major tobacco port with a finer harbor than its rival, old Baltimore located on the Bush River to its north, was named the county seat in 1707. By 1712 the government had been transferred there from old Baltimore. The town had four streets, a church, courthouse, tavern, stores, and a few houses. There were 40 plotted lots. Great stone wharves reached into the river for the tobacco fleet to land its goods.

In 1768, the county seat was transferred again, to the new Baltimore on the Patapsco. Baltimore had the best harbor and was growing fast, Joppa was dying. Siltation was the cause of death. The remains of the town's stone wharves are now on solid ground. Estimates by the Coast and Geodetic Survey say about 8 million cubic yards of sediment deposited near the port in the past 200 years filled about three miles of river. That incredible sedimentation was caused by farming and timbering which stripped the land of trees by the the middle 1800's, geographer Gordon Volman says.

"Much of the land from the Bush to Elkridge (Head of Patapsco) belongs to iron works, and therefore is mostly in woods," reported William Strickland in his "Journal of a Tour of the United States of America. 1794-1795." "The Principio Onions, Nottingham and Kingsbury iron works formerly belonged to gentlemen in England."

Iron ore, mined from the stream banks and the surrounding country, was smelted in the furnaces which were fueled with charcoal from the woods. The government encouraged industry, creating laws which permitted private citizens to condemn privately owned land for the building of a mill or forge. The land owner was paid for the loss of the use of the land. One yearly rent granted by a jury was 3 half-pence. Several claims were filed and new and then conflict arose. John W. McGrain, a historian working with the Baltimore county Department of Planning and an authority on industry along the Gunpowder, says one law permitted a person to condemn 100 acres for a forge mill.

Stephen Onion, who was the ironmaster at Principio Furnace, acquired 100 acres at the mouth of Little Gunpowder Falls in 1741. A few years later, William Dallam and George Brown acquired land nearby at the mouth of big gunpowder falls. Onion asked the Chancery court to void his competitors' grant because he had just built his forge and "The plenty of wood and encouragement of the act were the great inducements that first brought him from England to build iron works in the Province, a work which he was not able to complete for himself for above 20 years and after 1 years. Completion of a furnace is like to have the price of wood advanced upon him ... it would be 'Very Prejudicial' if a proper distance should not be considered for placing Such Works." The court did not agree, but Onion's iron works survived the competition anyway, Mr. McGrain says.

The iron forges turned out some of the industrial marvels of the times. For example, the first road roller in the United States was constructed in 1819 at Ridgely Mill. The roller weighed 3,308 pounds and required six horses and two human operators, Mr. McGrain says. Another mill, the Whittaker Furnace, manufactured shafts for the Russian Navy steamships. The iron shafts were the largest of their kind.

About 1770, many water mills were constructed. They ground grain, sawed wood and wove cloth. Most of them have vanished, either swallowed by the reservoirs or fallen with time. One of the few remaining mills is Jerusalem Mill, originally called Lee's Mill, on the Little Falls at Jerusalem road. The four story mill is considered one of the most impressive of all Eighteenth Century mills still standing in the state. Built of stone and wood by David Lee, a Quaker, in 1772, it included a saw mill and a grist mill, producing two vital commodities: lumber and foodstuffs. During the Revolution, the mill produced flintlocks for American troops. Loyalties were divided during the war, and just a few miles downstream, at the Lower Onion Mill, a miller lost his liberty, and cost another man his life, because he sold flour to the British, Mr. McGrain says. John Paul, the miller, was arrested in 1781 for selling flour to the British. Paul had gone aboard the Continental brig Nesbit, believing it was a British ship. He told the ship's officers he has two vessels loaded with flour ready to hand over. He was arrested on the spot as a spy. Paul escaped from Joppa jail, where he was being held, with the help of a man named Wescot or Walter Pigot, who also was called Heathcote and Walter Pickett. Pickett was captured and hanged on a pin oak tree at Joppa Gate. The tree was cut up for souvenirs.

Where Harford road crosses the river the Gunpowder Copper Works were located. Today, the buildings have been restored as homes. Levi Hollingsworth spent about \$170,000 on upgrading the mill in the early 1810's a small fortune at the time. It was the second copper mill in the country, and Hollingsworth got advice on its operation from the founder of the first Paul Revere. The mill processed copper blocks shipped from Wales, which was the copper center of the worked. Although early surveys showed copper deposits in the state, it never was seriously mined. However, the mill rolled the sheets of copper for the 1815 Capital dome in Washington from what was described as Frederick copper. The mill manufactured copper sheeting for the Navy's fleet and became so well known for the work that the term "Gunpowder copper" was used as a specification for special craftsmanship.

Under the waters of Prettyboy Reservoir are the remains of the several Hoffman paper mills. Paper was a scarce commodity in Colonial America and for about 10 years beginning shortly before the Revolution, the Gunpowder was one of the primary paper producing sites. In 1775, William Hoffman built his paper Mill on the Big Gunpowder Falls which May A. Seitz, a family descendant, describes in a book. She said Hoffman chose the stream because of its clear water, the power it supplied, and its proximity to York, PA, where he sold his paper.

"Time and place seemed to favor Hoffman's undertaking," she wrote. "The year 1774 when he started to develop his business saw the beginning of the American Revolution. Shortly thereafter the Continental Congress moved from Philadelphia to York" Hoffman was a great supporter of the Revolution, Mrs Scitz wrote, and one of the biggest customers was the Congress. "When it adopted currency, he manufactured the paper for nearly all the continental money," she said. One paper mill remains today in the Gunpowder basin, upholding the Hoffman begun tradition. Federal Paperboard, in White Hall, on First Mine Branch, a tributary of the Big Gunpowder.

The basin continued to boom through the Nineteenth Century mills as streams were dammed and farmers cleared the lands. The farmers banded together in clubs and granges to exchange ideas on growing crops.

During the civil War, the valley residents were split in loyalties. The Jerusalem mill was the scene of a skirmish between Union and Confederate troops. The rebels held the mill and opened the floodgates, drowning several Union soldiers. Downstream, where the Pennsylvania Railroad crosses the broad Gunpowder River at Magnolia, a dashing confederate Col. Harry Gilmore, whose home was in Baltimore county, burned the bridge in 1864. His cavalry had ridden across the county, where some of the men lived, and seized a railroad car, which they set afire and pushed into the middle of the bridge. In later years, Gilmore's home in Glen Ellen was swallowed by the Gunpowder's first reservoir Loch Raven.

Today, Amtrak trains roar over a bridge built in the same place in Magnolia on their way between Baltimore and Philadelphia. They zip by chase and Bengies, through the areas where centuries before tobacco was king.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's ducks were the gilded crop for the area around the mouth of the Gunpowder. Hunters came from miles around to shoot the canvasback that blanketed the bay with their white backs. Bowleys Quarters was one of the famous hunting grounds. Originally an old plantation the thousands of acres were bought by wealthy Philadelphians, who who turned the house into a hunting club. President

Grover Cleveland is said to have written his acceptance speech for his nomination there. Originally called Triumph or 13-Mile switch, the area became known as Bengies because President Benjamin Harrison hunted there often. Over the years the "j" became a "g".

In 1871, J Thomas Scharf, writing his "History of Baltimore city and county," described the gunpowder as a bounding powerful stream, "majestic" and "full of energy". "Yet it no longer fills the wide channel which it once occupied nor can it be estimated to contain much more than one fourth the volume of water that belonged to it about 100 years ago". "The drying up of springs which originally supplied its tributaries and the composition of the rocks into soil along the banks, have changed the order of distribution of the water and placed it in new relationships. Hillsides, once covered with trees, shrubs and herbage, retained the rainwater near the surface or allowed it to flow in a gradual supply to the springs beneath, while a notable portion entered the cracks in the rocks to trickle through and converge in the streams at lower levels.

"But now, the hillsides, baked by the sun, allow the rain to run off by a single impulse, to be lost in swelling floods. Although the water power had diminished, cut down by development it brought, the water remained clean. Soon the river water became more valuable as a commodity - drinking water for the city - than as a power source.