

Neighborhood NEWS

FALL • 2014

RUXTON-RIDERWOOD-LAKE ROLAND AREA IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Bellona Gunpowder Works Once a Booming Industry

by Bliss McCord

For more than half of the nineteenth century The Bellona Gunpowder Company of Maryland was a nationally recognized leader in gunpowder manufacture. Competing with the likes of the E. I. du Pont de Nemours Company, the company was among the first to develop that industry on a large scale in a young America. Although nearly all traces of that early explosive venture are long submerged beneath the water and silt of Lake Roland, let's re-examine this early local industry and its place in history.

Although there had been crude attempts by early colonists to make small quantities of low-grade gunpowder as far back as the mid-1600s, the American Revolution was the catalyst for powder manufacturing in the U.S. During the early years of the war nearly all of the colonists' gunpowder needs were met with imports, an obvious and serious liability. In response

to this precarious situation, "liberal proposals" were solicited by the Council of Safety to Marylanders as early as 1775 to build gunpowder mills in the state. That same year, the Baltimore Committee of Observation acknowledged the importance of gunpowder self-sufficiency for Baltimore and suggested the construction of a gunpowder mill "not more than fourteen nor less than six miles from the city" for that purpose. It also recommended the mill be sited north of the city in the belief that any attack would likely come from the south.

Over the next twenty years, six mills were constructed near Baltimore. One mill, built in 1791 on the banks of the Gwynns Falls, met with such success it was requisitioned to fill orders for the government. Unfortunately, a September 1812 accident caused

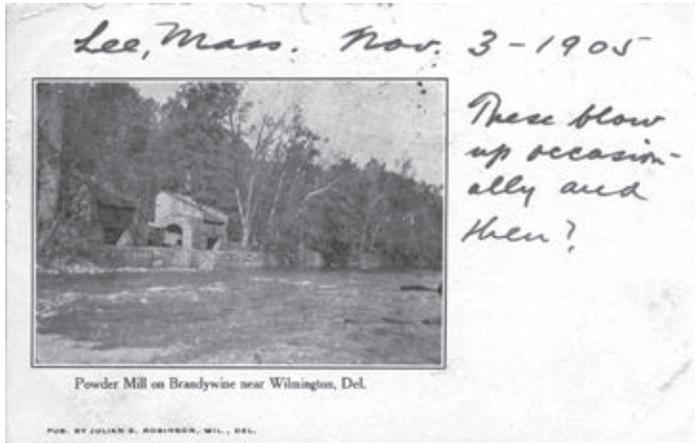
the powder in the Gwynns Falls mill to explode in a fire that ultimately destroyed most of the buildings but spared the lives of its workers. With a loss of \$20,000, the owners decided not to rebuild. Such a scenario was typical of this combustible industry.

Our local gunpowder mill, named for Bellona, the Roman Goddess of War, was built in 1801. Its location, a remote seven miles north of Baltimore yet accessible from Falls Road, was ideal. Waterpower, the

most important requirement, was plentiful as it sat at the confluence of the Jones Falls and Roland Run. By 1810, the powder works were capable of manufacturing thirty-two barrels of gunpowder per day. Under the ownership of U.S. Naval Agent James Beatty, it achieved national prominence

and at its zenith employed nearly fifty workers and encompassed an area of 360 acres on the land parcel formerly known as Hector's Hopyard.

The Bellona mills were typical for their time. The powder yard encompassed several mills and outbuildings – one map shows four mills – that ground the ingredients together with rollers and then compacted and granulated them. The constructed millrace, a fast-moving stream of water diverted from the Jones Falls, powered the mill wheels before rejoining the river downstream. Powder mill construction was unique. Usually, one mill wall was built to be weaker than the other three or sometimes the fourth wall was missing entirely. That side was always oriented



Example of gunpowder mill buildings
From University of Delaware postcard collection.

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All Aboard to Acorn Hill!

by Nancy Worden Horst

Acorn Hill, a children's creative play area in Robert E. Lee Park, opened in June to great shrieks of delight. The ribbon-cutting ceremony featured County Executive Kevin Kamenetz officiating while other elected officials, construction workers, parents, grandparents and Nature Council volunteers joined in the celebration.

In stressing the important role the Riderwood, Ruxton and Lake Roland area communities played in creating the children's playground, the County Executive said, "The perseverance of the community made sure that [Acorn Hill] happened...This will bring in young parents and their children who will develop a generational love for the Park." Kamenetz further stated, "I've never seen a public works project turn out so aesthetically pleasing," referring to the refurbishment of Robert E. Lee Park. "[The view] is just breathtaking." He said what began as a "kind of a dream...has become a fantastic amenity" for Baltimore County.



All Aboard! Photo courtesy Hord|Coplan|Macht

Following Kamenetz's remarks, Councilpersons Vicki Almond and David Marks presented Helga Morrow with a Baltimore County Council Resolution congratulating the Nature Council's Acorn Hill Committee on the opening of the children's playground (see photo below). Helga Morrow and Gail Stetten, together with the late Peter Maloney, a former RRLRAIA Board member and first president of the Nature Council, envisioned a place where children could learn through imaginative play.

Initial funding came from a state bond bill, sponsored by Sen. Bobby Zirkin and Delegates Dana Stein



Councilpersons Vicki Almond and David Marks congratulate Nature Council volunteer Helga Morrow on the opening in June of Acorn Hill children's creative play area in Robert E. Lee Park. County Executive Kevin Kamenetz looks on. Photo courtesy Siobhan O'Brien

and Dan Morhaim. Baltimore County generously provided material, labor and expertise to enable the concept to come to fruition. Working with Julie Higgins, a landscape architect with the firm Hord|Coplan|Macht, Morrow, Stetten, Nature Council and Park



What shall I play with first? Photo courtesy Hord|Coplan|Macht

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volunteers designed a place in the Park where children, their parents, grandparents and friends can experience the natural environment and history of Lake Roland and Robert E. Lee Park.

Various play stations with names such as 'Hollins Station', 'Jones Cabin', 'Mine Company' and 'B & S RR' reflect the rich history of the Park, with its railroad, mines, reservoir and mills. The stations contain structures for climbing, swinging, exploring and balancing and are designed for children to learn while having fun. Acorn Hill also has picnic and quiet areas, a butterfly hatchery, bird sanctuary and spaces for art projects and theater productions. A 'critter path' has been created nearby where children can discover the rich diversity of animal life in, and



Spider webs are great fun!
Photo courtesy Hord|Coplan|Macht

under, dead logs and where they can learn about protecting animal and plant habitats.

Ranger Shannon Davis and her team have planned programs that emphasize environmental conservation and exploration of animal and plant habitats – child-friendly doses of learning in the guise of great fun! Volunteer naturalists will help with demonstrations and programs. And, to attend these programs, getting to the Park is as easy as 'ABC'. Robert E. Lee Park is the only County nature park with access from public transportation; a scenic walk along the boardwalk leads directly into the Park from the Falls Road light rail stop. If you drive, parking is also simple. You can use the aforementioned light rail parking lot or you can park in the designated lot just past the Lake Roland dam.

So come out and explore Acorn Hill with your children, grandchildren or young friends and take a magical trip through the scenic

Park which is so rich with the wonders of nature and the drama of history. It's a rare pleasure for children of all ages. To help you with your plans a Park trails map is now available online and to download at <http://relpnc.org/trail-maps>.

Club Sandwich on a Stick

courtesy **Graul's Market**

Enjoy this simple and delicious fall recipe perfect for tailgates, special/school lunches and easy weekend dinners.

Ingredients:

- 1 slice whole wheat bread, toasted
- 2 slices Boar's Head American cheese
- 1 slice baked turkey breast
- 1 slice baked ham
- 8 grape tomatoes
- 4 cucumber slices
- 1 small pickle
- Bamboo skewers or tooth picks



Directions:

Cut toasted bread in half lengthwise; cut each slice into three even squares.

Cut turkey, ham and cheese into similar size squares.

Onto each bamboo skewer, thread bread square, turkey, ham, cheese, cucumber and second bread square. May repeat three times for larger skewers or serve as single combination for toothpicks.

Top with pickle slice and serve with favorite sandwich condiment. Pack in lunch box with ice pack. Enjoy!

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My Eagle Scout Project

by Ben Auwaerter

During the spring of 2013 I decided to do an Eagle Scout Project at Robert E. Lee Park to benefit our neighborhood. Working with Ranger Bart Viguers and my advisors from Lutherville Boy Scout Troop 711, I worked



Eagle Scout Ben Auwaerter

All photos courtesy Karen Auwaerter

out a three-part plan that took most of the summer and nearly 300 man-hours to complete. In addition to mulching trails and crafting a rolling sign for the Park, I constructed an enclosure for white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*) plants.

On the surface these plants may seem uninteresting, but they actually play an essential role in the environment of our local community. The



Ben and Troop 711 friends working on the site

Checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas phaeton*), Maryland's official state butterfly, eats the white turtlehead as its primary food source*. They also choose to lay their eggs on the underside of turtlehead leaves, making the plants critical to Checkerspot survival. However, because wetlands are disappearing due to development and an increase of deer over-browsing through their marshy habitats, the plants have become scarce. Despite several

efforts to breed Checkerspots in captivity, including one by rangers at Robert E. Lee Park (see **Neighborhood NEWS** Fall 2013), the butterflies fail to thrive without sufficient turtlehead colonies.

With all of that in mind, I chose to create an animal-proof

As You Like It is my favorite work of Shakespeare.

I enjoy public speaking and I love all things historical.

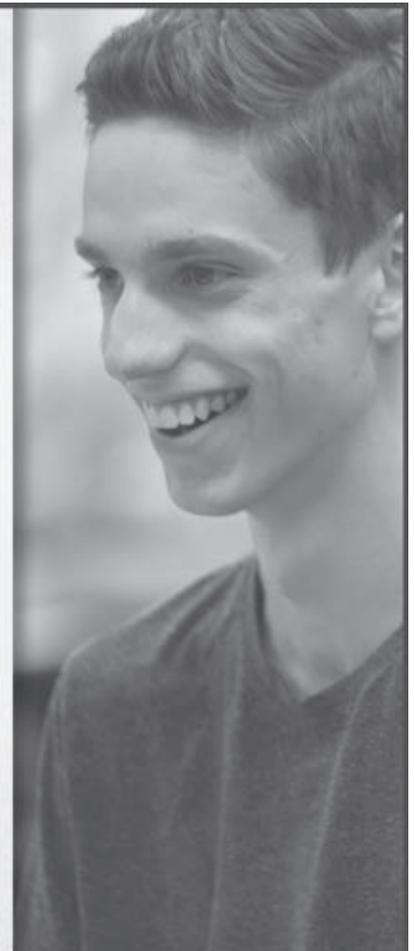
The very first Latin jazz song was composed by accident.

To scale, the earth is smoother than a billiard ball.

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Completed turtlehead enclosure



White turtlehead flower

enclosure on a walking path near L'Hirondelle Club Road close to the marshy banks of Lake Roland. Along with help from Park rangers I had identified this wetland and its colony of turtleheads as one in need of protection from roaming animals such as deer. My plan was to dig up offending grasses and just clean up the chosen plot, then fence in a 15 by 20 foot area and plant an additional fifty turtleheads in the protected area. Unfortunately, I scheduled this project on what proved to be a very rainy day. The friends I enlisted to help me were not too enthused to be there! However, despite losing shoes, phones and tools in the thick mud, the enclosure was eventually completed.

Turtleheads are perennial plants. They bloom July through September with a white blossom that resembles the beak of a turtle. They are a member of the snapdragon family. Hopefully these plants will thrive and spread and contribute to a reemergence of the Checkerspot butterfly in our neighborhood.

*See *Neighborhood NEWS* Fall 2013 for a list of other native plants that you can grow in your backyard to help sustain the Checkerspot butterfly.

Editor's note: Many thanks, Ben, and congratulations on becoming an Eagle Scout!



The colorful black, white and orange Baltimore Checkerspot feeding on a white turtlehead

“Voice of the Heart“

Continued from page 6

Studies from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. After teaching for a decade at the Center for Jewish Education in Baltimore and actively organizing community programs against violence and other social injustices, he began studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, PA, to become a rabbi. After ordination in 2007 Rabbi Geoff sought out like-minded reformists, formed a synagogue and rented space at St. John's Episcopal Church in Mount Washington. As the congregation grew and required a larger space, it relocated to Brown Memorial in 2009.

The Woodbrook location held a special attraction for Rabbi Geoff who sees his mission as offering accessible Judaism to the more contemporary Jews living outside the traditionally dense Jewish neighborhoods. More than 80 families joined since 2007 from neighborhoods all over north Baltimore – including Mount Washington, Pikesville, Roland Park, Owings Mills, Towson and Timonium. Word spread quickly of Rabbi Geoff's intelligent exploration of ancient dogma through a modern lens and warm embrace of tradition with a contemporary twist, especially among mixed-faith couples who often struggle to rear faith-filled Jewish children in more Orthodox communities.

To Rabbi Geoff's delight, Kol HaLev must sometimes hold two Friday Sabbath services (Shabbat). These can be held in several

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Bellona Gunpowder Works

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away from other structures so that, in the (likely) case of an explosion, damage might be controlled or at least directed. Other buildings were used to dry and package the powder, refine saltpeter* or house the mill manager. The finished product was stored in magazines.

Within fifteen years The Bellona Gunpowder Company was the leading producer of gunpowder in Maryland which, in turn, manufactured one-third of the nation's powder. Its success did not escape the attention of E. I. du Pont. His enterprise, which began its manufacture of gunpowder on the banks of Brandywine Creek in Delaware in 1802 (see postcard on page 1 for example of buildings), went on to become the vast chemical company we know today. In 1815, du Pont stated that "one of our principal motives is to strive against the competition of the Baltimore factories." By December 1814, our local mill had incorporated and its name was changed to The Baltimore Gunpowder Company of Maryland, with James Beatty becoming the sole proprietor. By then, it had already played a role in the defense of Baltimore three months earlier.

The War of 1812 against Britain was initially fought on the seas and along the Canadian border. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814, though, Britain directed more military resources toward the U.S. conflict, blockading parts of the East Coast with

their Navy and attacking on land with British troops and hired mercenaries. The wisdom of maintaining a local source of gunpowder for Baltimore's self-defense became readily apparent. In a letter dated June 12, 1814, the chief ordnance officer of the U.S. War Department ordered two hundred barrels of Bellona gunpowder to supply the Fort McHenry magazines. Scarcely three months later that supply was put to good use in the defense of Baltimore when British ships sailed up the Chesapeake in an effort to take our city from the south. As all good Marylanders know, the fort and city were bombarded for two days, but the enemy was successfully prevented from entering Baltimore's harbor. (As an aside, a cannonball did penetrate the fort's magazine during the bombardment but, by some fluke, did not explode thereby avoiding enormous destruction.) Things might have turned out differently, one might surmise, had the British advanced from the north and destroyed the powder mills on their march south to Baltimore.

All you have to do is look at the thick walls of the magazine at Fort McHenry to understand the volatility of gunpowder. Although the combination process for the three central ingredients – charcoal, saltpeter and sulfur – is the most dangerous of the steps in gunpowder production, there are so many ways to ignite the product (carelessness, sparks, faulty machinery, lightning) that powder mill owners often found they no sooner began production than the whole enterprise would be blown sky high – literally. Sadly, the Bellona company was no exception.

The first accident occurred in 1801 when one of the stone mills exploded, fortunately without loss of life. In 1812, a saltpeter shed caught fire and four other buildings were destroyed by the ensuing explosions. Both times, Beatty rebuilt. But by far the worst accident occurred on August 29, 1820, when two explosions, reported to have been heard as far away as Washington and Chestertown, instantly killed at least three men and severely injured several others. The August 30 *Federal Gazette* described "a scene of awful and utter desolation," with the loss or damage of four buildings. Tenacious Beatty rebuilt his business while his profits fell to a mere 3%. E. I. du Pont was quoted as saying that even a gunpowder business owner making 10% profit would eventually fail due to the explosive nature of the business and how much capital was needed for cyclical replacement of damaged buildings.

Adding insult to injury, Beatty had to fight the Baltimore and Susquehanna Railroad over the proposed construction through his property of a Greenspring branch to Westminster. The original proposal would have hugged the western side of the Jones Falls and would skirt the powder works at a safe enough distance. But at the last minute plans changed and the route chosen came perilously close to the powder works, endangering all. Early trains were known to spew ash and sparks and were rarely welcomed by the owners of the property they traversed. One could hardly blame Beatty, already beset with mill problems, for vigorously fighting the proposal. In the end, Beatty won his case. He was awarded \$1,200 for the taking of his 7.5 acres and the Railroad agreed to abide by the original proposal.

But while Beatty was still in the process of repairing the mills, tragedy struck yet again on October 15, 1821, when four people, including the manager, were killed and two others injured. Nine years later, a minor explosion killed yet another person. Still, the business remained competitive enough to worry Mr. du Pont, who mused in 1831, "Nevertheless we should not like to give up altogether the Baltimore market on account of the competition

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of Mr. Beaty (sic).” Explosions continued to be the price of doing business.

By the time of his death in October 1851, James Beatty’s stressful business had been passed to his son, Charles, who continued to operate the company until 1856. Perhaps it was with a sigh of relief that he closed the mill and sold portions of the property for \$17,500 to the City of Baltimore for its proposed waterworks, now Lake Roland (see “The Dam History” in the Winter 2009-10 issue of *Neighborhood NEWS*).

By July 1861, when water from the Jones Falls first crested the top of the Robert E. Lee Park dam, most traces of the old Bellona powder works were forever submerged. Perhaps those driving the road bearing the mill’s name will sometimes give pause to consider the forgotten history of the Bellona powder works and its many ghosts. Indeed, during the anniversary festivities for the Battle of Baltimore, when we think of the many who lost lives in the war, we should also pay homage to those who died in service to the soldiers’ needs. All of them contributed to this special place we still call the land of the free and the home of the brave.

**Saltpeter is a naturally-occurring mineral containing potassium nitrate, one of the main ingredients in gunpowder.*

Note: Information for this article was gleaned from the following sources: “Gunpowder Production in Post-Revolutionary Maryland” by Arlan K. Gilbert, Maryland Historical Magazine, September 1957; “Middling Planters of Ruxton” by Joseph M. Coale; and Historical Society of Baltimore County (www.hsobc.org).

“Voice of the Heart”

Continued from page 9

locations within the Church, depending on attendance, accommodating the community as it grows. The Parlor, Fellowship Hall and the Chapel have all been used. While none provide a conventional synagogue sanctuary, Rabbi Geoff focuses instead upon building community through people rather than bricks and mortar. No matter the location the Shabbat services remain sacred and life-affirming – a mix of prayer, contemplation, music and learning. Some are followed by meals or other opportunities that extend the communal celebration.

Though forward thinking in their theological interpretations, Kol HaLev maintains some ancient traditions, too. The Torah scrolls, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible from which passages are read during a Shabbat service, are reverently housed in a hand-made ark near Rabbi Geoff’s office and carefully carried to each service. Additionally, children in grades K-5 attend ‘Beit Lev’, a Hebrew Sunday School, albeit a progressive one, in dedicated classroom spaces. Older children are offered classes intended to guide them through the coming-of-age years that may culminate in a bar or bat mitzvah if they choose.

Not surprisingly for this inclusive Jewish community, the relationship they have with Brown Memorial Church has blossomed into more than a business one. From the start Pastor Dale welcomed the opportunity to form a relationship with Rabbi Geoff and by so

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