

**RECORD OF THE COLUMBIA
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1908: THE OLD CANNON FOUNDRY
ABOVE GEORGETOWN, D.C. AND
ITS FIRST OWNER HENRY FOXALL**

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Georgetown, D.C. And Its First Owner Henry Foxall by Madison Davis

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THE OLD CANNON FOUNDRY ABOVE GEORGETOWN, D. C., AND ITS FIRST OWNER,
HENRY FOXALL.

By MADISON DAVIS.

(Read before the Society, February 11, 1907.)

In the "History of Western Maryland," by J. T. Scharf, Vol. 1, pages 135 and 136, the following statement is made concerning the condition of military affairs in the province of Maryland at the outbreak of the American Revolution:

"Great difficulty was experienced at the beginning of the war in obtaining supplies. The arsenal at Annapolis was almost empty. To overcome these difficulties, the Convention gave encouragement and gratuities for the manufacture of saltpetre, materials for clothing, and munitions of war. Powder-mills were erected, and Colonel Hughes, of Washington County, agreed to furnish cannon for the province, and established a foundry on the Potomac River, one mile above Georgetown, where the first cannon were made in this country. A portion of the old stone building still remains, while broken fragments of cannon are at this time to be found in the stream of water that flows at the base of the building. Daniel and James Hughes, of the Antietam Iron Works in Washington County, and John Yoast, of Georgetown, also made cannon for the Revolution. Shells and cannon were also made at Catoctin Furnace, in Frederick County, by James and Thomas Johnson, during the Revolution, and some were used at the siege of Yorktown."

These statements seem to have been made with almost a reckless disregard of historical accuracy. Some of them are in the main true; but so far as they apply to

the establishment of cannon foundries at or near Georgetown, they have only the flimsiest foundation. Nevertheless, they have been accepted as true by so eminent a scholar as Professor Bernard C. Steiner, librarian of the Enoch Pratt Library, of Baltimore, Maryland, who, in a paper entitled "Western Maryland in the Revolution," published in Volume XX of the *Johns Hopkins University Studies*, repeats the account of the Hughes cannon foundry in the following words:

"The first cannon said to have been cast in this country were made at the foundry of Colonel Daniel Hughes, on the Potomac River, one mile above Georgetown. A portion of the building yet remained in 1880, while broken fragments of cannon were still to be found in the stream of water flowing at the base of the building."

Omitting all discussion of the allegation of these two writers that the first cannon made in this country were turned out at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, except to say that it is probably incorrect,* as well as of the further assertion that cannon were made at Catoctin Furnace by James and Thomas Johnson for the use of the Revolutionary forces, which is also probably incorrect, but concerning which I have not fully informed myself, I propose to show that the story of the Georgetown foundries, agreeable as it is to our local pride, and however harmonious it may be with that burning spirit of patriotic enthusiasm which permeated the province of Maryland all through the period of the Revolution, and nowhere more thoroughly than in that part of its territory now comprehended in the District

* In Harper's "Book of Facts," p. 147, it is said that cannon were cast at Lynn, Mass., by Henry Leonard, in 1647, and at Orr's Foundry, Bridgewater, in 1648. In 1735 the Hope Foundry was established in Rhode Island, where six heavy cannon ordered by the authorities were cast in 1775. The heaviest guns used at this time were 18-pounders.

of Columbia, is a myth, having, however, like most myths, a germ of truth as its nucleus.

In the first place, the only streams worthy of the name emptying into the Potomac River that can be supposed to answer to the description given, are, first, the little creek that has its outlet near the terminus of the old Potomac Canal, which is over two miles above Georgetown; and, second, the creek, formerly known as Deep Branch and Mill Branch, now universally called Foundry Branch, flowing into the river at a point nearly opposite the Three Sisters, a group of partly submerged rocks just one mile above High Street in Georgetown. The first of these streams is unquestionably *not* the one to which Scharf and Steiner refer. It is true that near it is an old stone building, and that this building was in a state of ruin in 1880; but the history of this structure is perfectly well known, and that it was ever used for the making of cannon, either before or after the Revolution, is absolutely beyond belief. Its mission was a more pacific one. It was built soon after the planting of Georgetown, as authorized by act of the Assembly of Maryland in 1751, was used in the beginning as a flouring-mill, and continued to be so used down to a time within the memory of many of our oldest inhabitants. The old race may still be traced to its source at the Little Falls; the architectural arrangement of the building is utterly irreconcilable with its use for foundry purposes; within its walls may be exactly located the places where the burrs were once busily running; and I am not sure but that half-buried fragments of these stones, instead of broken cannon, are yet observable in the approaches to the crumbling ruin.* The other stream—Deep, or Mill, or Foundry Branch—is no doubt that to which Scharf and Steiner make allusion. It is within the given distance from

* This structure is known as Eads's Mill.

Georgetown; it has near its banks a ruined stone building; and it seems to otherwise accord with the description given. But upon examination of the Maryland and District records, it is ascertained that none of the land contiguous to this brook ever belonged to or was leased by any person of the name of Hughes, and going back to the condemnation of the surrounding land in 1762, which is early enough as a starting-point, the list of owners does not include the name of Hughes. It seems to have been acquired and from time to time transferred by a number of different persons representing families still well known in Maryland and Georgetown — Murdock, Lingan, Thompson, Bayly, Deakins, Tillotson and others—until 1800 and several years thereafter, when three or four tracts, more particularly connected with the subject of this paper, were purchased by Henry Foxall, concerning whom more will be said later on. If a foundry had been established at this point in the days of the Revolution, certainly the ground on which it stood would have been held by the projector either as owner or lessee.

In the second place, no local tradition points to the existence of a cannon foundry anywhere near Georgetown *during the period of the Revolution*; no writers except those above mentioned make any reference to such an establishment; and there are no remains or ruins in existence to give the appearance of probability to the story other than those to be hereafter described, and whose later origin can be easily established. There may, indeed, have been found as late as 1880 along the banks of the little creek some pieces of cannon; but the guns from which these fragments came were not cast in the days of seventy-six: they were the imperfect product of a manufactory started nearly a quarter of a

century later, and which continued in the same general line of work for fifty years afterward.*

Besides the foregoing reasons, the unsuitability of a spot on the Potomac River one mile above Georgetown as the location of a cannon foundry, *at the beginning of the Revolution*, may be reasonably urged. The place was quite distant from the sources of supply of fuel, lime, and iron ore; the river above was not navigable; the Potomac Canal existed only in the prophetic brain of its great originator, George Washington; and the cost of wagoning pig-iron from the furnaces where it was made, would have been enormous. It would have been infinitely preferable to establish a cannon foundry farther west in Maryland, or at some other point, where iron ores existed, where the materials used in fluxing them were in close contiguity, and whence the finished product of the concern could have been more readily and economically conveyed to the east and south, where the operations of the impending war were more likely to be carried on. And this fact was obvious to the business men of that day; for we find that three iron manufactories, with the advantages referred to, had already been founded in Maryland—one known as Snowden's Iron Works, between Bladensburg and Baltimore; one near Frederick, called the Catoctin Furnace; and the other at Elizabethtown, afterwards Hagerstown, quite well known as the Antietam Iron Works.†

* The writer of this paper remembers having seen at the place mentioned, when he was a lad, several pieces of a cannon that had burst in testing. He was informed by his father, that the exploded gun had been cast in the year 1850, when James Maynadier Mason, executor of General John Mason, was superintending the operations of the neighboring foundry.

† Prior to the Revolution there was a smelting and iron-founding establishment doing business at Colchester in Fairfax County, Va.,

A still further reason against the correctness of the story under discussion lies in the fact that one of the proprietors of the Antietam establishment was Daniel Hughes, the man who is said to have built and carried on the cannon foundry near Georgetown; and in the additional fact that he and his partner, Samuel Hughes, (not James Hughes as Scharf erroneously calls him,) at the very incipency of the war, patriotically proposed to enter upon the manufacture of cannon for the province, at the Antietam works, and thereupon actually began the work under a contract with the Council of Safety. It further appears that they were inexperienced in the making of ordnance, and naturally there was some delay and more or less of failure in carrying out their agreement.* For example, although their contract was made long before the close of the year 1775, it was not until the latter part of March, 1776, that they had been able to produce a single gun; and even then the piece was found on trial to be defective, notwithstanding the confident predictions of the makers. The following letter as to this matter, dated March 22, 1776, from Mr. William Lux, of Baltimore, to the Council of Safety, is quite interesting:

“Mr. Hughes cast one 18-pounder on Monday, and it was bored. He expected to have four ready last night, and begs to have some person sent up to prove them, that if any fault be found, he may remedy it before he proceeds too far. He

near the mouth of Ocoquan Creek, the foundation walls of the structure being still traceable; but the building itself, as well as the village around it, has long since disappeared. The celebrated George Mason, who lived at Gunston Hall, about twenty miles below Georgetown, on the Potomac, near Colechester, in one of his letters, suggested that this foundry might be used for the supply of cannon to the American Army; but there is no evidence that it ever was so used.

* For references to this contract, see “American Archives,” Fourth Series, vol. 5, pages 463, 504, 1594, and vol. 6, page 1256.