

Behind the NC: Shenandoah Valley history

Governor Spotswood, the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe and the first great endurance ride in American history

SECOND OF FIVE PARTS

In light of Governor Spotswood's now-famous 16-day ride from Williamsburg over the Blue Ridge to the Shenandoah River and back (see April *EN*), the way was paved for European settlers to move into the fertile Shenandoah Valley.

However, the 50-mile long Massanutten mountain range surrounding the fertile inner valley proved to be an obstruction to settlement. Like the walls of an ancient castle, the daunting mountain range ringed the entire valley with an impregnable barrier of sheer rock and steep slopes, with the north and south branches of the Shenandoah River encircling all sides like a giant moat.

Only one entrance gave access to the interior valley: a very narrow slip in the northern end where the tumbling rapids of Passage Creek rushed over boulders and rockfall on its way out towards the river. Only the most stalwart beast—and man—would attempt to walk up that furious creek into the valley. Those with less daring were relegated to the exhausting climbs up the rock flanks of the mountain.

Spotswood and his "Knights of the Golden Horseshoe" never made it into the inner valley, but two notable people did shortly afterwards. The first was a man who gave his name and lore to the valley; the second was the most famous man in American history who not only gave his name and legend to the area, but would give it a place in the annals of our country as well.

Powell's Fort

Arguably the most famous individual in Fort Valley history was a man named Powell, a character whose background and exploits vary from honored lord to rank scoundrel to spy to hunted counterfeiter. Many different stories are told about Powell: in one relatively unknown account of questionable origins, he is reputed to have been an English lord who came to Virginia in the mid 1740s with his granddaughter, who suffered from tuberculosis. He was said to have been a personal friend of Lord



Heading up Sherman's Gap on the Old Dominion Trail. Photo: Flora Hillman.

TALES FROM THE TRAIL
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Legends of Fort Valley and
the Shenandoah Valley
Site of the 2006 AERC
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Fairfax and, thus, acquired land on top of the west Massanutten mountain and built a house there "...so that his granddaughter might have the benefit of high altitude." This same historical account says Powell traveled around with the Indians who showed him where old Indian gold mines were located. Powell smelted what he found and made gold bars, which he divided with the Indians for their help. He made several trips back to England, and buried much of the gold on Signal Knob, where his granddaughter was buried. The abutment of the chimney of the Powell cabin was later found, according to tradition, but the gold remains hidden to this day.

The more colorful and popular version of Powell paints him as a scoundrel and highly adept counterfeiter. This version is one generally agreed upon by the locals and in historical accounts. According to lore, Powell was reputed to have had some issue with the Winchester authorities and in the mid 1740s took refuge in the inner Massanutten valley. The natural stronghold of the northern end of the inner valley was perfect for defense, and provided a safe place where

Powell could continue his counterfeiting scheme and still be hidden from the law.

In hiding from the law, he supposedly uncovered several of ancient Indian silver and gold mines that were discovered by a French explorer to the valley in 1707. This discovery not only encouraged his business of smelting counterfeit coins, but reportedly they were better-manufactured than the official colonial coins, and more in demand by the locals. This enraged the authorities even more, but attempts to collar Powell were unsuccessful. His holding in the inner valley was difficult to breach, and his hideouts too numerous.

Skirting just outside the law, and popular with his supporters, Powell remained in his "Fort Valley" for many years, working the old Indian mines in secret under the cover of darkness while dodging the law. As time wore on the locals began referring to the Massanutten valley as "Powell's Fort Valley" or "Powell's Fort." In later centuries the valley floor would become simply Fort Valley, and the mountain range to the west would be known as Powell's Mountain.

One day, however, Powell's luck ran out. He was caught and summarily removed from society by a short rope and a long drop courtesy of the courts. According to

popular belief, Powell knew he might be apprehended one day, so he had buried for safekeeping a horde of gold and silver somewhere on Signal Knob overlooking Strasburg at the far northern end of the mountain range. He never returned to claim his treasure, and while several generations of treasure seekers have hunted for it, it has never been found.

But every native still claims, “Thar’s gold in them thar hills,” or at least silver, and to this day whenever lights are seen flickering in the mountains people who live in the valley say, “Old man Powell is at it again, digging up his silver and gold.”

While the riders in the 2006 AERC National Championship will remain just south of Signal Knob with Powell’s hidden treasure as the trail crosses from the western mountain range at Mud Hold Gap down into the valley and back up through Sherman’s Gap to the summit of the eastern Massanutten range, it wouldn’t hurt for the riders to spy a bit closer than normal along the trail from time to time for a glint of gold or silver. One never knows, but as the fugitive Powell slipped along the Massanutten in the dead of night, clutching his horde of gold and silver to escape the law, he may well have dropped a coin or two along the way!

The road that George built

Not long after Powell bequeathed his name and legend to the valley, a young teenager named George found himself on the top of the mountain overlooking the same fertile valley. In due time, like Powell, George would also lend his name to the area with the creation of a one million acre national forest preserve that would include this fortress valley.

As part of a surveying team sent west of the Blue Ridge in 1748 to measure several thousand acres of land owned by Lord Fairfax of England, 16-year-old George was hired to walk the length of chain up and over the southern part of the Massanutten, helping lay out what is now the Page and Warren county lines. The young boy was highly impressed by the natural fortress configuration of the valley, and studied it carefully, never knowing that his observations would come back to his mind 30 years later.

In the winter of 1777, wearing a general’s Army uniform, he overlooked the devastating situation at Valley Forge and the very

real threat of the nearby British Army crushing the life out of the American rebellion. It was during these darkest, most desperate hours of the American Revolution that George Washington turned to his generals and announced plans for an escape route west into Virginia. His mind was on the Alleghenies as the farthest point west, but his thoughts also focused on that natural fortress he remembered as a 16-year-old boy. That fortress was Powell’s Fort Valley.

According to several historical accounts, Washington instructed fellow Virginian, General Daniel Morgan, who commanded the famous Virginia sharpshooters regiment, to build a road into Fort Valley as a last-ditch retreat from the British. Washington is said to have remarked of that mountain-top spot, “I can hold off a whole army with just a few men [there]” while employing the guerrilla tactics used so successfully by Morgan’s men against the British.

Morgan returned to his home in Winchester that winter and work was begun building a road over the eastern face of the Massanutten. The earliest historical records trace that road as going over Sherman’s Gap, now a famous landmark on the Old Dominion 100-mile ride. This site would have been the closest and best point to bring up men, wagons, and supplies to fortress the unbreachable and most defensible Buzzard Rock at the northern mouth of the valley.

As luck would have it, Washington never did need that road. Fortunes changed, and the Americans won the war. Over the next several centuries the road was overgrown by the forest, and today the only traces remaining are the trail that is part of the northeastern route of the 2006 AERC National Championship Trail.

As the National Championship trail surmounts Sherman’s Gap and then heads south along the Massanutten ridge, it would be only fitting to take a moment’s reflection and a nod to the history underfoot of the mules, horses, and men who toiled 300 years ago to build that final escape route for the American Army, now a part of our own endurance history as well.

And we all have 16-year-old George to thank for that.