

The Story of
Sanders Mill
on
Cross Creek

Courtesy of Fort Vance Historical Society

Lest
We
Forget



**Dedicated to those in attendance at the “New Beginning” of the
FORT VANCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, August 1, 2009.**

The Story of Sanders Mill on Cross Creek
Research & Story by June Campbell Grossman

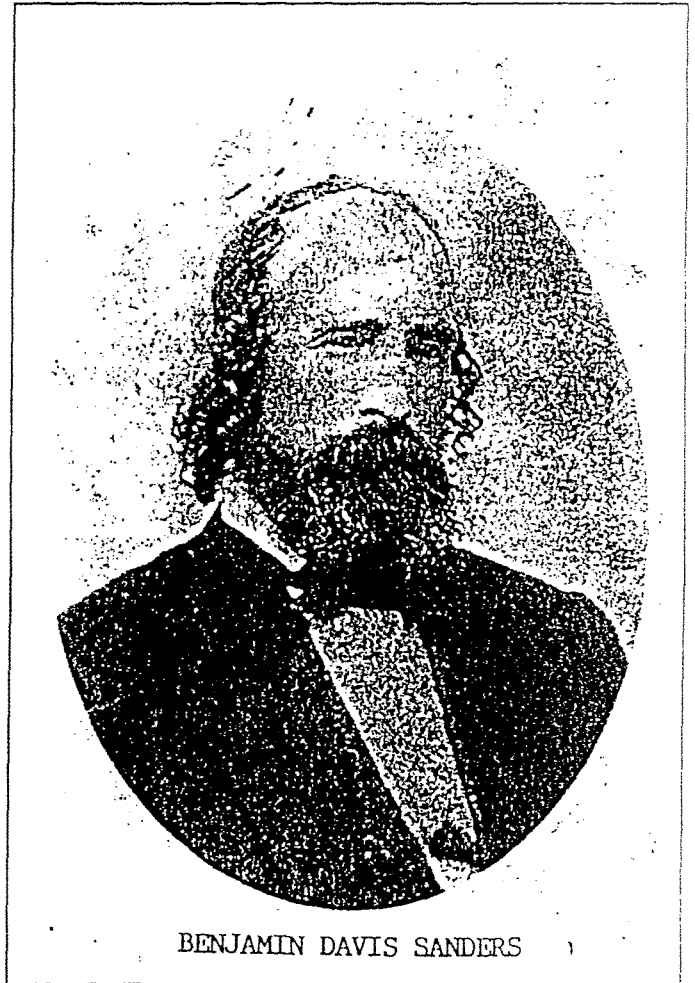
The Story of Sanders Mill on Cross Creek

One of the most colorful figures of the Cross Creek Valley was Benjamin Sanders. He was born in Culpepper, Virginia, in 1812, the son of Edward and Mary McCausland Sanders. Mary was the daughter of George and Catherine Kidd McCausland of Hanover Township, Washington County, Pennsylvania. His father, Edward Sanders, died in 1814, leaving not only little Benjamin aged two, but his older brother, George, aged five. After Edward's death, Mary married a McCausland cousin of hers, but the story was that this step-father mistreated the Sanders boys, so they were sent to the Kings Creek area near the Pennsylvania state line to live. This new home for them was probably that of their paternal grandparents, Benjamin and Nancy Ratcliff Sanders.

During his youth, Benjamin learned the trade of millwright, and in 1832 was sent to do some work on the Nathaniel Hunter mill on Cross Creek. At the sight of Nathaniel's mill in operation, Benjamin fell in love with it and vowed if he ever could, he was going to buy the Hunter mill and lands. He would move into the beautiful, rambling house that stood near the banks of the creek, and make it his own. This, he did, twenty-six years later, moving from Harmon Creek below Colliers, to Cross Creek, on a cold, rainy, October 21st, in 1858. Here, he and his wife, Martha Ryland Sanders, daughter of Fredus and Elizabeth Ewing Ryland, were to make their home for the rest of their lives - Benjamin for 26 years, and Martha for 46.

Benjamin Davis Sanders was one of the most brilliant men ever to set foot in the Cross Creek Valley. He was a prolific inventor, having taken out some thirty patents to his credit. His most outstanding invention was for a grain cleaner, then called a "smut" machine. He made this machine and sold it to other mills through agents. For this invention, he was awarded a silver medal by The Society for the Advancement of Science. He traveled to many states, promoting this invention. Among them was Iowa, where his son, George McCausland Sanders, was born. For use of his invention, he at one time received 1200 acres in Jasper County, Iowa. This transaction was the key to the fulfillment of his dream. In 1858, he traded this land for 121 acres on Cross Creek which included the mill and surrounding lands of Nathaniel Hunter. The Hunter homestead, which for twenty-six years had been the house of his dreams, was contained in this bargain.

On his Cross Creek land, he drilled the first oil well in Brooke County. Drilling began March 22, 1861, using the old grist mill for power. Although no oil was struck, it held the interest of the neighboring farmers who formed the Cross Creek Oil Company on April 1, 1865.



Drilling in the area years later proved that Benjamin's property was only on the edge of the great oil fields of Föllansbee. It was, however, believed by many, that if the equipment to drill deeper had been available in Benjamin's day, oil probably would have been struck, and the history of the Sanders family and the entire Cross Creek area would have been dramatically altered.

Benjamin and his wife were the parents of eleven offspring. The loss of a child is always considered life's greatest tragedy. Benjamin lived to see the passing of four of his eleven children. The first loss was the death of John Ewing Sanders, the fourth child, who died in October of 1840 at the age of three weeks and one day. The eleventh child, Mary Margaret, the youngest of the eleven, died in February of 1859 at the age of exactly 18 months. Doctors of that day labeled her ailment "brain fever". When the fifth child, George McCausland Sanders, was sixteen years of age, a serious epidemic of disease broke out, and the entire Sanders family with the exception of George, came down with it. Young George waited on all of them, day and night, in their sufferings. Eventually they all recovered. By the middle of the summer, when the others had all gained their health, George also came down with the same dread disease. One month after his seventeenth birthday, on August 11, 1859, just 7 months after the death of little Mary Margaret, George died also. Each of these deaths took its toll with Benjamin. But little did he dream that perhaps the worst was yet to come, since he felt that he was partially to blame for the events which led up to this final tragedy.

Had Benjamin refrained from being caught up in the politics of the time, life for him might have been a different story. The issues surrounding the Civil War were explosive ones, and Sanders allied himself with the southern sympathizers of the day, an act which nearly led to his own death and which culminated in the tragic loss of his eldest son, Edward. An account of this incident was copied verbatim from the papers of Benjamin's son, John Davis Sanders, many years later. It is reprinted here.

Having been reared in Virginia, Mr. Sanders was a firm believer in the Southern cause when circumstances were developing that led this nation into the Civil war. Although he was a law-abiding, peaceful citizen, his strong tendencies and stout-hearted defense of the Old South left no doubt as to his position in the matter of slavery.

While there were many families among his neighbors who shared his views secretly, he stood out from the others because of his willingness to assert himself.

This led to the wide circulation of false rumors and idle gossip. These rumors gathered momentum until some scatter-brains advanced the story that Mr. Sanders had secured arms and ammunition, and was laying carefully prepared plans to incite a riot in the Northern Panhandle of what is now West Virginia. It can readily be seen why this area was a veritable 'hot-bed' since it is a narrow strip just a few miles wide, bounded on the east by Pennsylvania and on the west by Ohio -- both states being Northern territory. While his sons, of whom there were five, owned some sporting rifles, Mr. Sanders was not a military man, and to become involved in an undertaking of this type was far beyond his comprehension.

By the mid-summer of 1861 the North and South were warring vigorously. Altho' no major engagements were underway in Northern Virginia numerous pranks and petty vandalism on both sides were commonplace. In early August, officials at Camp Carlisle, located at Wheeling, had been informed of Mr. Sanders' stand as a secessionist and a Capt. Britt with a company of men was dispatched by boat to proceed up the Ohio River to Cross Creek with orders to march to the Sanders home, arrest him, search the premises, confiscate any arms, weapons and ammunition, and to return to Wheeling with their prisoner.

These instructions were carried out. The military arriving at the Sanders home at daybreak Wed., Aug. 22, 1861, where they surprised the family, ransacked the house, dumped food out in search for arms, left the place in complete disorder and took their prisoner to Wheeling where he was placed in a Federal Penitentiary without being formally charged.

Now Mr. Sanders had lived in this community for many years, was well and favorably known and enjoyed many friends, among whom was Edwin M. Stanton of nearby Steubenville, Ohio, who held the exalted position of Secretary of War in President Lincoln's cabinet. When Mr. Stanton learned that his friend Ben Sanders was being held, an order was immediately issued that he be released with full restoration of his property.

However it was more than 2 months before this information reached the Secretary's office, and during this time Mr. Sanders was held captive.

While the release was promptly executed, none of the property confiscated was ever returned, altho' official efforts were made to locate it. Nor was any attempt made to reimburse this wrongly accused man for the embarrassments, humiliation and inconvenience he suffered.

The morning after the incident reported above, it is said that Edward, the eldest son left home and joined the Confederate Army. In the spring of 1863, he started for home for a visit, but was ambushed and killed by Union soldiers. This, coupled with the death of the baby, Mary Margaret, in February of 1859 and of George at the age of seventeen the following August, was too much for Benjamin to bear. Always a staunch and faithful Christian, he gave up. He could no longer believe in a God who denied his fervent pleas on behalf of his beloved children. He renounced his faith and is said to have died a professed atheist. In life, he was a controversial figure. But after his death among his possessions were found unpaid notes where he had loaned money to his neighbors and friends and had not been reimbursed, to the tune of over \$30,000 - a giant sum for any day and age. He died twenty years before his beloved wife, Martha. They are buried side by side in the Olde Baptist Graveyard, a few hundred yards from his beloved Sanders Mill.

<p>Pictures and information on the Sanders family have been generously provided by a great-great grandson of Benjamin Davis Sanders, Howard Standish of Tempe, Arizona.</p> <p>The writer wishes to express the deepest gratitude for the same.</p>	<p>Benjamin Sanders, an old and well-known citizen of this county, died on Wednesday of this week, after a protracted illness.</p> <p>Mr. Sanders was a man of extreme views, in political matters, and at all times ready, either in fair or good weather, to stand by them. The out-spoken declaration of his views in '60 and '65 caused him considerable trouble, and as events proved an unjustifiable arrest and imprisonment for some time.</p> <p>In business matters, Mr. Sanders was a man of integrity, and a kind and generous friend.</p>	<p>In Geological studies he was extremely well versed and widely and favorably known among the Scientists of the age. His studies being not confined to books alone, but pursued diligently in nature's domain.</p> <p>The sympathy of the public is with his bereaved family.</p> <p>Benjamin Sanders, of Brooke county, W. Va., died Wednesday of last week, and was buried the following Thursday, in the Baptist burying ground. The cause of his death was paralysis. His funeral was largely attended by his many friends.</p>
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