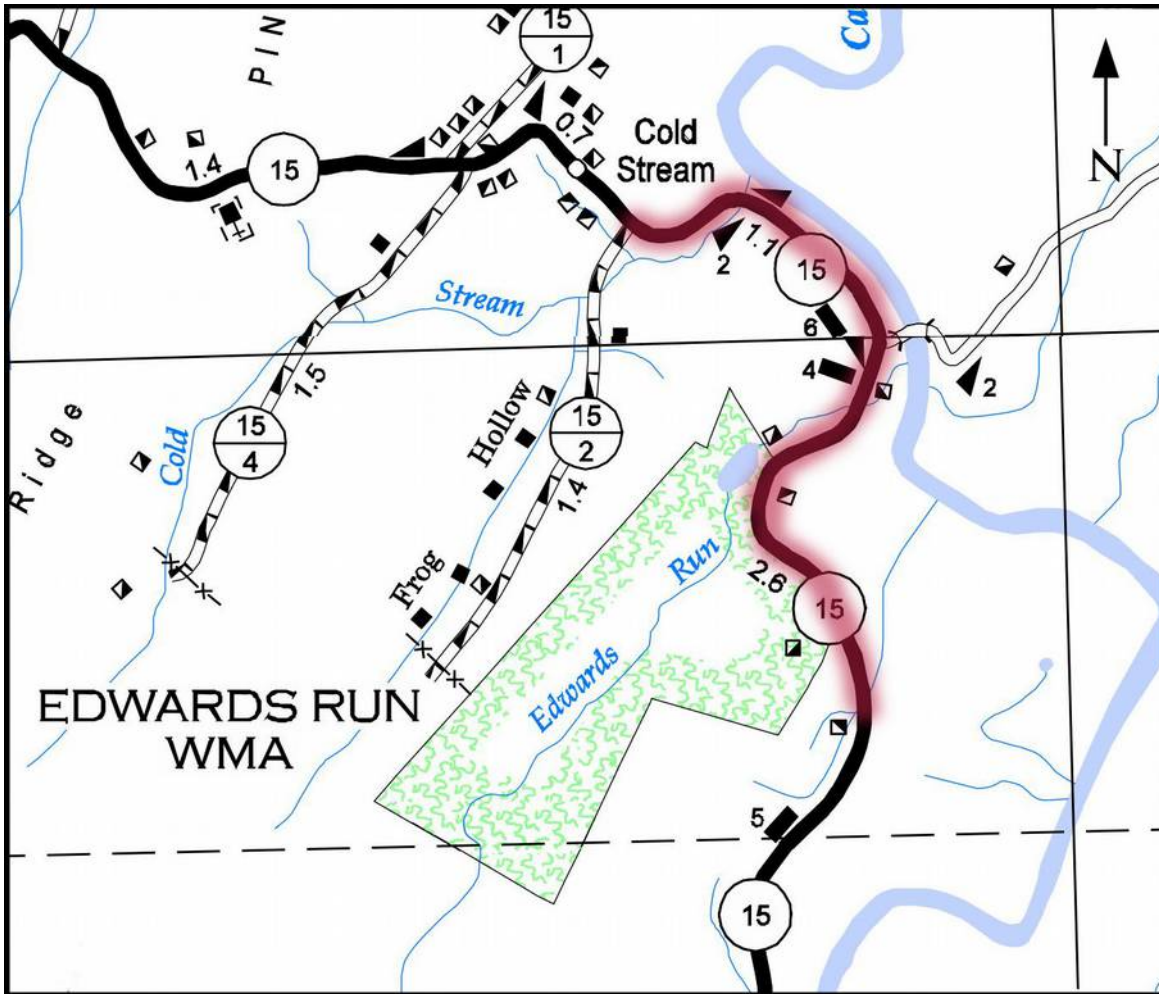


Proposal for Naming the Section of
County Road 15, Cold Stream Road,
From Edwards Run to Frog Hollow Rd.

"Gunsmiths Trace"



Prepared for Delegate Ruth Rowan
by www.HistoricHampshire.org
February 3, 2017
corrected 10/24/20

Gunsmiths Trace

Early Gun-Making Industry

Although today one does not think of Hampshire County as a center of industrial endeavor, in its earlier days when so much manufacturing was done on a small scale by local craftsmen, the county was known as home to a number of highly respected gunsmiths. Some sources say as many as forty gunsmiths at one time or another worked in old Hampshire County.¹ One location that had several resident gunsmiths was the area along Edwards Run and Cold Stream Run.

This location was a good spot for many kinds of small manufacturing since it had access to two ever-flowing stream, Edwards Run and Cold Stream, both sources of power as well as water. It also bordered the Cacapon River. However, its main benefit was that until the late 1830s it lay along the main road from Winchester to Romney and Cumberland, Maryland and points west were America was moving. Even when the new Northwestern Turnpike was completed, it was still an important highway leading to the National Road at Cumberland.

Zebulon Sheetz, James Rinehart, Henry Topper, B. F. Shane and Christopher Slonaker were five gunsmiths who owned land in this area. Apparently, gunsmiths were an interconnected community since we see land swaps and equipment loans among them. They were also somewhat transient since they often moved westward were the business was moving. Land records and census records related to the Edwards Run area tell us a good bit about the gunsmiths.

Deeds show that in August, 1819 Zebulon Sheetz bought land from the Edwards family, earlier settlers along the Cacapon River. In 1822 he bought 33 acres along Edwards Run where a later deed would show a lot corner was about 25 feet from the gunsmith shop(Deed Book 22, p. 404).



The acorn was often used by Zebulon Sheetz on his rifles.

Zebulon Sheetz was a very interesting person having seen service in the War of 1812. Following that he became a skilled gunsmith who was also a community leader being a Justice of the Peace in Hampshire County appointed in 1828. His guns are highly prized today.

James Rinehart was perhaps the most prolific gunsmith who worked in this area.² On May 16, 1835 he bought land from Zebulon Sheetz thus moving into a location already associated with gun-making(Deed Book 31, p. 92). He had a brother John W. who was also a gunsmith. By 1850 he had moved to Ohio. By this time the industry was experiencing many changes as industrialization was beginning to replace the individual craftsman who made an

entire gun. By the time of the Civil War rifle mass production was in full swing.

B. F. Shane was another man who was both a blacksmith and gunsmith. In 1856 he sold his land on the Capon and North Branch Turnpike to Christopher Slonaker and bought a parcel on Edwards Run. Wilmer Kerns relates that Shane "was killed by an anvil in his blacksmith/gunsmith shop at Cold Stream, Hampshire County, on April 17, 1861."³

Christopher Slonaker, III was born and raised in the Cold Stream area, the third generation of his family to reside in the area.⁴ His purchase of a gun shop and second lot as found in Deed Book 49, page 77, shows the interconnectedness of the gunsmiths. The deed deals with land owned by James Rinehart, John Rinehart, B. F. Shane and Christopher Slonaker. It is for land and a gun shop owned by B. F. Shane which he and his wife are selling to Christopher Slonaker. One of the lots joins Rinehart's property. The second lot which contains the gun shop had previously been owned by James Rinehart. The deed further mentions how one lot had previously been mortgaged by John Rinehart. Thus this half acre with a gun shop had been consecutively owned by four gunsmiths.

Henry Topper lived not far away along the Cacapon River (Deed Book 19, page 208). He is shown in the 1820 Industrial Census of Virginia with one helper and a production of 12 rifles per year. William Ansel says of him: "Henry Topper appeared to have been engaged in the repair of firearms, clocks and other mechanical contrivances in general use during his time..."⁵ This shows us that like most mechanical craftsmen, the gunsmiths were probably engaged in various other activities which made use of their mechanical skills and special tools. Therefore they benefited their community in several different ways.

An industrial community

In November, 1825, a Scottish traveler came to the Edwards Run - Cold Stream area and left a very informative entry in his journal. It tells much about the people of the community and the activities they engage in which enriched the area:

"The population of this little world, besides Zebulon, consisted of the miller and family, and a turner and his family; and, as a central position, for the convenience of the population of the neighboring valleys, contained, in addition, an Episcopalian chapel about size enough to hold an ordinary sized church organ..."

"Bethel Valley, in shape bears a striking resemblance to the letter Y; so, after leaving Mr. Sheetz's house, we travelled down the tail; and at the foot, crossed a small stream which runs down the middle of the valley. We then passed a tannery, and immediately afterwards a half-ruinous house, which they said was the abode of a hatter; and two or three hundred yards more brought us to rather a decent house, accompanied by a saw-mill, wool-carding machine, and cossinette factory, belonging to a Mr. Edwards, about to be one of my patrons. As Mr. Sheetz was a gunsmith, and his two neighbours, the one a miller, and the other a turner, it will be easy to see, without my telling, that this little remote valley had rather a manufacturing air about it. After leaving Mr. Edwards', where we stayed a little, a few paces brought us to the big Capcaphon - the same creek I had waded yesterday - about a mile further up, and which I now crossed the second time."⁶

Conclusion

Today there is hardly any evidence of the once bustling community along Edwards Run and nearby along both sides of the Cacapon River. Only one old building, the Thomas Edwards House*, remains to remind us of life here 150-250 years ago. The naming of this stretch of road "Gunsmiths Trace" will be a reminder of what the almost forgotten community was like. It will highlight a small but important industry that has left many prized artifacts in the hands of serious gun collectors across America. It will also highlight the fact that Hampshire County was once dotted with communities which included churches, mills, local artisans and families who created most of the food, clothing and equipment they needed to survive.

Footnotes:

1. <http://www.historichampshire.org/history/gunmakers.htm> *Gunsmiths of Hampshire County* by Mark Smith.
2. *Early Gunmakers* by Ansel, p.132
3. Kerns, Historical Records, p. 330
4. *Gunsmiths of West Virginia*, p47
5. *Early Gunmakers* p. 130
- 6 *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, p.729

Bibliography

Gunsmiths of West Virginia, Third Edition; Fred R. Lambert & James B. Whisker; Old Bedford Village Press, Bedford, Penn. no date.

Hampshire County, West Virginia, 1754-2004, edited by Roberta R. Munske and Wilmer L. Kerns; published by the Hampshire County 250th Anniversary Committee, Romney, West Virginia, 2004

Historical Records of Old Frederick and Hampshire Co., Va.; by Wilmer L. Kerns; Heritage Books, Bowie, Md., 1992.(revised edition 2007)

History of Hampshire County, West Virginia, From Its Earliest Settlement to the Present; by Hu Maxwell and H. L. Swisher; A. Brown Boughner, Morgantown, WV, 1897 (reprinted by McClain Printing Company, Parsons, WV, 1972)

Tait's Edinburgh Magazine for 1839, Volume 6, November, p.729; William Tait, editor, Edinburgh: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1839
found at: http://www.electricscotland.com/history/america/scottish_emmigrant3.pdf

West Virginia History, Volume XLV, 1984, p. 125-144, "Early Gunmakers Of Hampshire County" By William H. Ansel, Jr.

Gunsmiths of Hampshire County, An Article by Mark Smith found at:
www.HistoricHampshire.org/history/gunmakers.htm

* Thomas Edwards, III corrected from original version 10/24/20



a Rinehart rifle stock



J. Rinehart rifle stock



Details from rifles created by "Gunsmiths Trace" makers