

Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge

Charles B. Dew

AFTER finishing my work on Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works¹—the South's largest manufacturing facility and a major employer of slave labor—I thought I would write a broad-based study of slave ironworkers in the antebellum and Civil War South. When I was a visiting professor at the University of Virginia in 1970–71, I began research on my new project in the collections at Alderman Library. One of the most valuable collections there was the Weaver-Brady papers, which contain detailed information on slave ironworkers at William Weaver's Buffalo Forge and Etna Furnace, about seventeen miles south of Buffalo Forge in Botetourt County. This collection contains materials from the period in the late 1850s and 1860s when Weaver's son-in-law, Daniel C. E. Brady—grandfather of the Historical Society's Pat Brady—was managing the business.

In the usual way of historians, I searched for pertinent records in many other repositories—in North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. At the Duke University Library I discovered another group of William Weaver papers. When I discovered a third cache of Weaver-

1. Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker to the Confederacy: Joseph R. Anderson and the Tredegar Iron Works*, rev. ed. (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1999).

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Brady materials at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin,² I knew it was time to rethink my entire project. The McCormick Collection also includes the papers of Lexington attorney James D. Davidson, who was Weaver's lawyer and closest friend. Brady's two-volume "Home Journal" contained the daily record of work done by slaves at Buffalo Forge from October 1, 1860, until June 30, 1865.³ Davidson's papers contained numerous references to slave labor at Weaver's ironworks. I began to hope that I might be able to take an in-depth look at how the slave system functioned at a single manufacturing enterprise.

Thus I came to Rockbridge County, where I found a gold mine of records on Weaver and his slaves. Fortunately for me, Weaver was a notorious litigator, and his numerous lawsuits generated many official papers, most of which have survived. The Clerk of the Rockbridge County Court then was Harry Wright, who was happy to show me the extensive chancery court records in the courthouse; he also suggested that I needed to talk to Pat and Mary Brady, who still owned Buffalo Forge. Pat introduced me to his brother, Tom, who had an immense knowledge of nineteenth-century forge and furnace sites in Virginia and of the technology they used. He also had inherited William Weaver's desk full of documents, which Tom Brady made available to me. One item from the desk was a thin volume labeled "Names, births &c: of Negroes"—the slave birth and death register kept at Buffalo Forge. Another fortunate survival of this period I discovered at the National Archives: in the papers of the Lexington office of the Freedmen's Bureau was one of the few marriage registers to survive. Thus I had a record in the Reconstruction era of marriage registrations for most of the former Buffalo Forge slaves and some information on their children. Taken together, the records I had available made it possible to construct the genealogies of many of the Buffalo Force slave families. My tentative plans born in Madison, Wisconsin, were confirmed, and I set out to write the history of master and slave at Buffalo Forge.

2. The Society in Madison initially seemed to me to be a most unlikely place to find antebellum and Civil War records of Valley of Virginia ironmaking and slavery, but as many Rockbridge Historical Society members know, the documents are in the McCormick Collection that was assembled many years ago by the McCormick Historical Association in Chicago, because Cyrus Hall McCormick, the inventor of the Virginia reaper, got his start in and around Rockbridge County. The McCormick family gave the collection to Wisconsin in 1951.

3. I later found the 1858–60 Home Journal volume at Alderman Library, where it had been mislabeled.

At the time William Weaver died on March 25, 1863,⁴ the seventy-seven-year-old Pennsylvania native had lived forty years in the Valley and had been one of the richest men in the entire region, the largest slaveholder in Rockbridge County, and owner of twelve thousand acres in and around the county. He had been born on March 8, 1781, to a family of German farmers at Flouertown, near Philadelphia. He was reared on the farm and in the strict Dunker sect, although William seems never to have joined the church formally. William was not content to be a farmer, however, and he took up a number of occupations—merchant, miller, textile manufacturer—and did well in all of them, accumulating enough capital by 1811 to try to buy into the iron business. This effort failed—his bid for the property was too low—but he made the acquaintance of another entrepreneur, a Philadelphia merchant named Thomas Mayburry, who had contacts in Virginia.

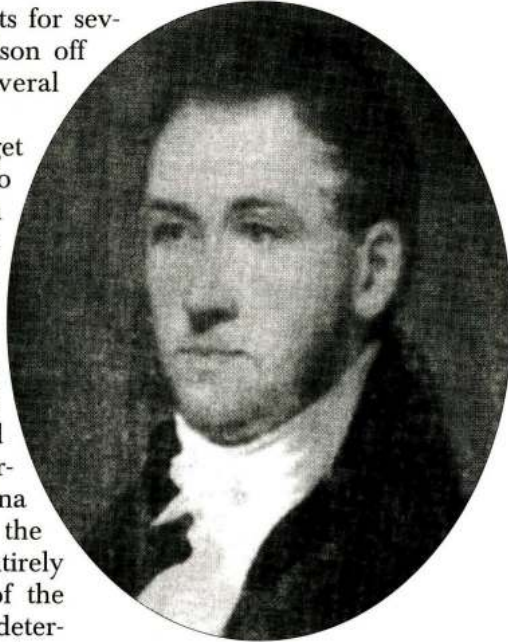
Weaver and Mayburry met again in 1814 and discovered their mutual interests in becoming the owners of an iron works. Mayburry had already been to Rockbridge County in 1809 and had looked over property owned by William Wilson, who owned Union Forge (which Weaver would later rename Buffalo Forge) and two charcoal blast furnaces named Etna and Retreat, plus six thousand-odd acres of ore and woodland seventeen miles away in Botetourt County. Wilson was eager to sell, but Mayburry saw problems: Etna Furnace was in serious disrepair and Retreat had an inadequate water supply. (Water turned the wheel that pumped the large bellows that forced air into the furnace.) At intervals, Wilson sent letters to Mayburry encouraging him to buy his properties, and in July 1814, Weaver and Mayburry, encouraged by the inflated prices iron was commanding as a result of the War of 1812, decided to visit Wilson and see if there was any potential for making some quick money.

When Weaver and Mayburry visited the Rockbridge properties in July 1814, Weaver was enthusiastic—despite the fact that the current owner's creditors had had him thrown into prison for debt—and convinced himself that the asking price of \$27,500 greatly undervalued the properties. The partnership of Mayburry & Weaver was formed and signed an agreement on July 30, 1814, to buy Wilson's property for \$5,000 down and four annual payments of \$5,625 beginning January 1, 1815. Fortunately for the cash-strapped partners, Wilson had difficulty establishing a clear title to the forge property, and this enabled Weaver

4. He and his wife are buried in the graveyard at Falling Spring Presbyterian Church, about a mile from Buffalo Forge. We know very little about his marriage (1830-50) to Eliza Newkirk Woodman, but it seems not to have been a happy union, and there were no children.

to postpone the annual payments for several years and then to buy Wilson off with partial payments for several more years.

The new owners needed to get the furnaces operating quickly to meet their payment schedule. On February 1, 1815, Weaver put Retreat Furnace into blast and discovered that the water supply was indeed inadequate; he produced twenty-eight tons of pig iron and lost several thousand dollars. More thousands would be needed to conquer the water-supply problem and repair Etna Furnace. Equally serious was the labor shortage. Weaver was entirely unimpressed with the quality of the local white workforce and soon determined to run his enterprises with slave labor alone. But Mayburry was not quite the moneyed capitalist that

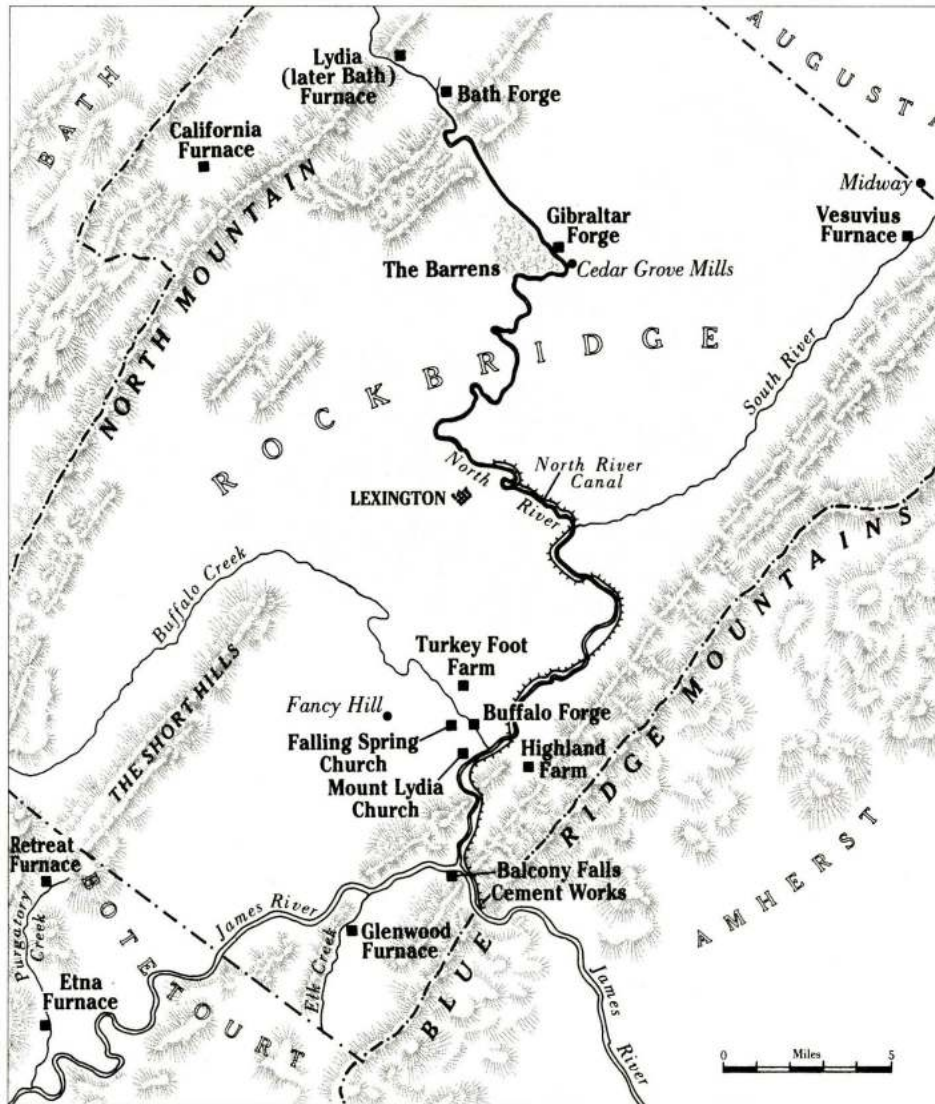


Painting of William Weaver of Pennsylvania. Painter and date unknown.

Weaver had thought, and he could not put up his share of cash to purchase slaves. In the short term, it was cheaper to rent slaves, and a well-established hiring market existed for surplus slave labor in the counties east of the Blue Ridge. Weaver had some success in hiring slaves for the 1815 season.

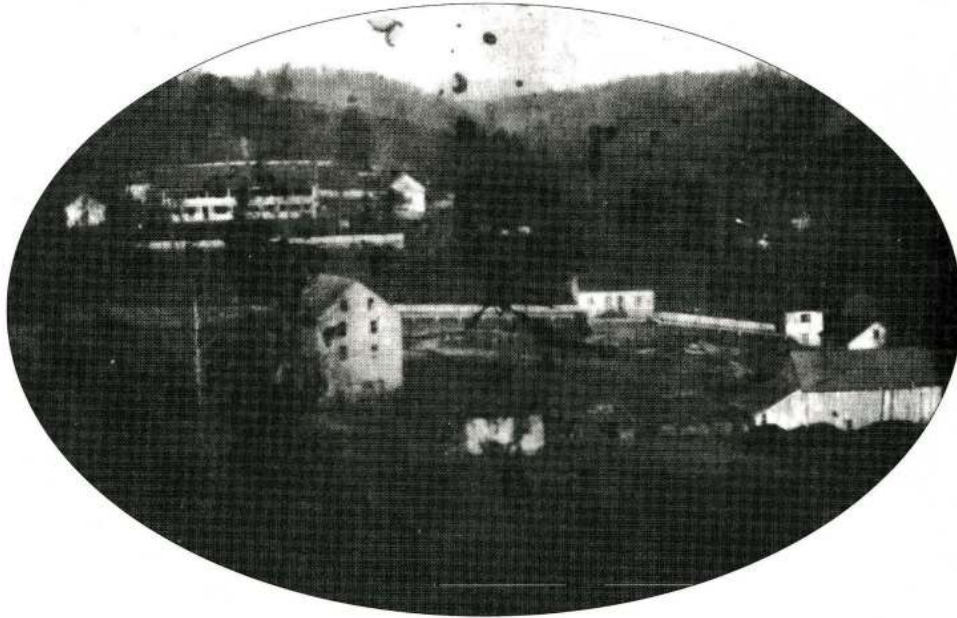
In July 1815, after only six months in Virginia, Weaver had to return to Pennsylvania for family reasons (his parents were in failing health, among other things), and Mayburry was left in charge of the Virginia properties. Weaver expected his absence to be brief, but it lasted eight years. Nevertheless, Weaver did not neglect his investment. In October 1815, he purchased his first slaves: eleven people for a total of \$3,200 from John Wilson, son of the former owner. The slaves consisted of a skilled ironworker, his wife, and their four boys, and a "breeding woman" named Mary and her four daughters. Weaver carefully, and without Mayburry's knowledge, had the bill of sale made out to him personally rather than to the firm of Mayburry & Weaver, so when the firm dissolved in 1825, he retained the key part of the partnership's labor force. In the years ahead, his "Wilson negroes" and their children would prove to be the nucleus around which Weaver would build his extraordinarily able crew of black ironworkers.

“Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge”



Places related to William Weaver's enterprises. (from *Bond of Iron*, p. 5).

Slaves did most of the jobs associated with running a furnace—exceptions were the founder, who supervised the day-to-day operations, a clerk or two, and the manager: these were usually white men. At least twenty slaves were needed to keep a blast furnace going day and night for up to nine months, and generally gangs of fifty to a hundred were required. Slaves served as founder's assistants; as fillers, the men who

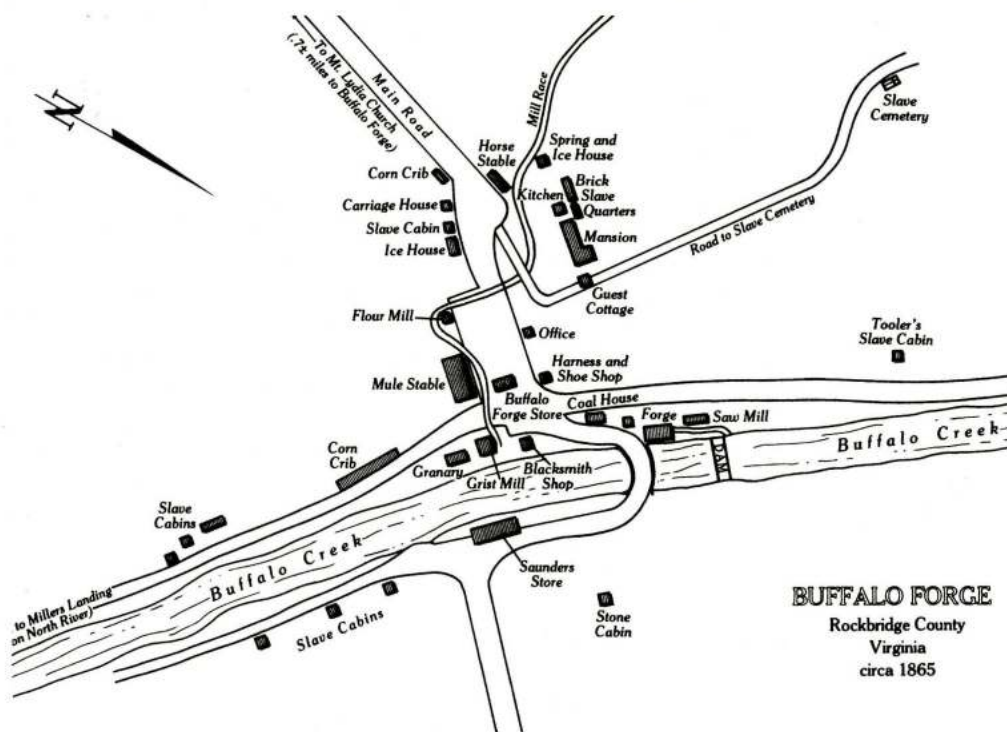


Ambrotype of Buffalo Forge taken in November 1860 by D. H. Placker, an itinerant photographer. Weaver's house dominates the left background; the flour mill is the multi-story structure in the left center; the stable is on the far right; the harness shop is the small two-story structure just above the left end of the stable; and the Buffalo Forge store is between the harness shop and the stable.

kept the furnace loaded with alternating, carefully measured layers of ore, limestone, and charcoal; as guttermen, who drew off the molten iron into the casting beds; as miners and ore pounders, who dug and blasted the ore and limestone flux and prepared them for the furnace; as choppers, who felled the trees and cut cord after cord of hardwood for the coaling pits; as colliers, who converted this wood into the thousands of bushels of charcoal required for a successful blast; as teamsters, who were skilled enough to handle the large teams and heavy wagons needed to haul charcoal, ore, and limestone over primitive roads to the furnace; and as carpenters, pattern makers, blacksmiths, and general laborers.

The Mayburry & Weaver enterprise experienced constant labor shortages and financial problems. Weaver's more successful businesses in Pennsylvania helped to subsidize the Virginia operation, and this doubtless encouraged Weaver to stay near his northern properties. Mayburry continually predicted troubles, and it appeared to Weaver that his partner seemed to have a knack for making gloomy predictions come

"Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge"



true. Weaver sent four different managers from the North to Union Forge between late 1814 and the summer of 1821, but none proved satisfactory. By the end of 1821, Weaver's investment in the enterprise was nearly \$40,000. William Wilson, the former owner, filed suit for the \$6,000 he was still owed, and in 1822 the court ruled in his favor. Luckily for Weaver, Wilson soon died, and his heirs were easier to deal with.

In July 1823, Weaver came back to Virginia to see if he could salvage his investments. By the end of 1824, Weaver was convinced that his partner was lazy, dishonest, and incompetent, so he methodically set about dissolving the partnership (which Mayburry opposed, as it gained him nothing). The future of over two dozen black lives were at stake in the struggle for control of the partnership's slave labor force. The partnership was dissolved in February 1825, but their continuing struggle over money landed them in the tangled maze of Virginia's chancery courts and was only resolved when the former partners agreed to an out-of-court settlement in 1836. Meanwhile, Mayburry continued in the iron business. Having lost control of Etna, he later acquired Gibraltar Forge and built a new forge on land he purchased on South River near the Augusta County line; he named the new works Vesuvius.

For the “Wilson negroes,” the 1836 settlement was a tragedy. Mary’s family, which had been living with Mayburry’s family at Etna Furnace for years, was divided between the two men. Mary and her three youngest children—John, who was twenty, Hamilton, thirteen, and Ellen, eleven—remained with Mayburry, who moved away. Her daughters Sally and Louisa and their thirteen children went with Weaver. Certainly this division brought deep sorrow to the slaves involved. Subsequent events were to show, however, that Mary and the children who remained with her were not forgotten by those family members who went to Buffalo Forge in January 1837. Every generation of children born to her descendants there had a girl named Mary, and there were quite a few Johns, Hamiltons, and Ellens as well. If the names given to these children tell us anything at all about the slaves at Buffalo Forge, it is that they bitterly resented the destruction of their family, and by exercising an element of their previous and limited autonomy—the right to name their own children—they acknowledged and preserved the memory of a tragic moment in their family’s history.

In 1825, before he began to dissolve his partnership with Mayburry, Weaver received reliable intelligence that the price of iron was likely to rise steeply out of the depressed state it had occupied for the past decade. In September he purchased Lydia Furnace on the Big Calf Pasture River and renamed it Bath, reflecting its proximity to a local spa known as Rockbridge Baths. As the owner of the only furnace in blast in Rockbridge County, Weaver made considerable money on his monopoly of iron for local purchasers and from sales to Richmond. In his first three years in the Valley manufacturing iron on his own account, Weaver made in the vicinity of \$30,000. He paid off his debts, expanded his facilities, and increased his slave labor force.

Initially, Weaver’s reputation among slaves, while difficult to document, seems to have been as a decent man who treated his workers well. But conditions at the isolated Bath works had deteriorated badly in 1828 and 1829, and slaves there ran away more frequently and he had difficulty hiring slaves to work there. Management changes and capital expenditures put the Bath works back into reasonable shape by 1831, although given the choice, slaves still preferred working at Buffalo Forge over Bath. Management of Bath works proved to be a thorn in Weaver’s side for years. Weaver secured complete control of the works by 1838, but litigation continued until 1855.

At Buffalo Forge, much of Weaver’s time was occupied by labor problems: assembling a crew of slave artisans and motivating them to work with speed and care. He had an excellent nucleus of slave artisans

at Buffalo Forge, but until their children grew up and were trained, or until he could buy additional black forgemen, Weaver was forced to use free white, free black, and hired slave labor to supplement his own skilled workers. Weaver's early crews were, in fact, about as thoroughly integrated as any work force at any industrial establishment in the Old South. While the mix of free and slave workers created no apparent friction, this was not a situation Weaver particularly liked. He always felt vulnerable depending on white workers who had freedom of movement and ready access to liquor. Hiring skilled slaves was also a risky proposition, as there was no guarantee that their owners would hire them to Weaver in subsequent years—such slaves were in great demand by other ironworks—or that the slaves themselves would wish to return to Buffalo Forge. A single slave artisan could make a critical difference in forge operations.

By late 1827, Weaver had purchased enough selected slaves to fulfill his goal of having a full complement of slave forge workers. Nevertheless, Weaver was still vulnerable to labor shortages, and he was constantly on the lookout for scarce trained forgemen. Skilled artisans even had a bit of power. In 1828, Weaver purchased Billy Goochland from an Amherst County man. Goochland himself delivered to Buffalo Forge his master's letter of willingness to sell. While Weaver had the right to satisfy himself about Goochland's qualities, the slave was looking over Weaver and Buffalo Forge himself. Few slaves in the antebellum South had the right to veto a proposed sale, but Goochland did and may well have exercised it. For whatever reason, he did not join Weaver's work force. Ben Gilmore, a strong sixty-seven-year-old when Weaver purchased him in Campbell County in 1830, was given permission to go back across the Blue Ridge to look for a place where he could live and work while he attempted to earn enough money to buy his own freedom.

The master of Buffalo Forge went to elaborate lengths to try to ensure that the quality of his slave hands was exceptional. In considering a purchase, he began with a careful examination of the slave's work habits and personal qualities. Weaver also looked for slaves who were willing to apprentice to one of his refiners or hammermen and who demonstrated a talent for ironmaking. He believed that family connections—uncles, cousins, older brothers—were good predictors of such talent.

By the end of 1840, Weaver had managed to replace with slaves all his white workers in key Buffalo Forge positions. From then on, he relied largely upon recruits from the ironworking slave families at Buffalo Forge to replace forgemen who were growing too old or were becoming too infirm to stay at their jobs. By 1860, Weaver owned sixty-six slaves, twenty-eight of them adult men, and his core forge crew had all grown to manhood at Buffalo Forge.

Motivating slaves was a key problem. As owner, Weaver naturally had considerable coercive power, but any attempt to rely on the whip to achieve satisfactory levels of production would quickly have ended his career as a Virginia ironmaker. Whipping might not only damage a valuable slave, but leave him seething with anger and possibly retaliating with sabotage. There is no indication that Weaver ever whipped one of his slave forge workers during his forty years in Virginia. Sale of the slave was possible, of course, in extreme circumstances, but skilled workers were not easily or quickly replaced.

The alternative to force was positive incentives, so from his earliest days in Virginia, Weaver paid slaves who did extra work. Each artisan had a specific daily or weekly task to perform; for anything they turned out over this required amount, he compensated them in cash or goods from his store at Buffalo Forge. This "overwork" system was a common practice in slave-manned manufacturing establishments throughout the antebellum South. Pay for slave overwork was identical to the pay given free artisans for doing the same job.⁵ For example, the customary quota of bar iron throughout the Valley was 1,120 pounds of bar iron per day for a two-handed forge (i.e., with a master hammerman and his underhand). The two men split the six dollars per ton of bar iron drawn over that amount. Similarly the daily task of a wood chopper was 1.5 cords or 9 cords per six-day week. Slave choppers in the early 1830s were paid at the going rate of 33.5 cents per cord (40 cents by the late 1830s) for all the wood they cut above their weekly quotas. Slaves who performed common labor on Sundays, holidays, or at night were paid the standard wage of 50 cents per day.

The overwork system embraced almost every conceivable job around Weaver's ironmaking installations. Colliers could stand watch over the charcoal pits during their time off; ore bank hands could mine and wash extra ore; teamsters could haul iron exceptionally long distances or work on Sundays; slaves could weave and sell the standardized charcoal baskets used to charge both blast furnaces and forge fires with their fuel. Weaver paid slaves who used their own time to cut the flexible wooden hoops used to band his flour barrels (the price was 25 cents per hundred "hoop poles," as they were called). Other slaves earned money by going into the woods during their off hours and felling trees for Weaver's sawmill (the price was 12.5 cents for each "saw log"). Several hired teamsters who did not return home for the customary Christmas break were paid \$5 yearly in the late 1830s for working dur-

5. The amounts and values of overwork were kept in ledgers by the forge clerk. At Buffalo Forge these ledgers were called "Negro Books," which are in the Weaver-Brady Papers at the University of Virginia Library.

ing the holidays. Some slaves received what amounted to a regular wage for performing their jobs satisfactorily. A hireling named Isaac, for example, was paid \$1.50 per month in 1830 for serving as the forge "stocktaker"; his responsibility was to keep the forge supplied with iron and charcoal. A slave named Allen Collier was given the same amount monthly for superintending the production of charcoal at the Buffalo Forge coaling grounds. Weaver also extended the opportunity for overwork to his agricultural hands. Special situations frequently provided the slaves with a chance to earn overwork: fighting fires, pumping water out of flooded mines, rebuilding roads, or cutting ice for Weaver's icehouse.

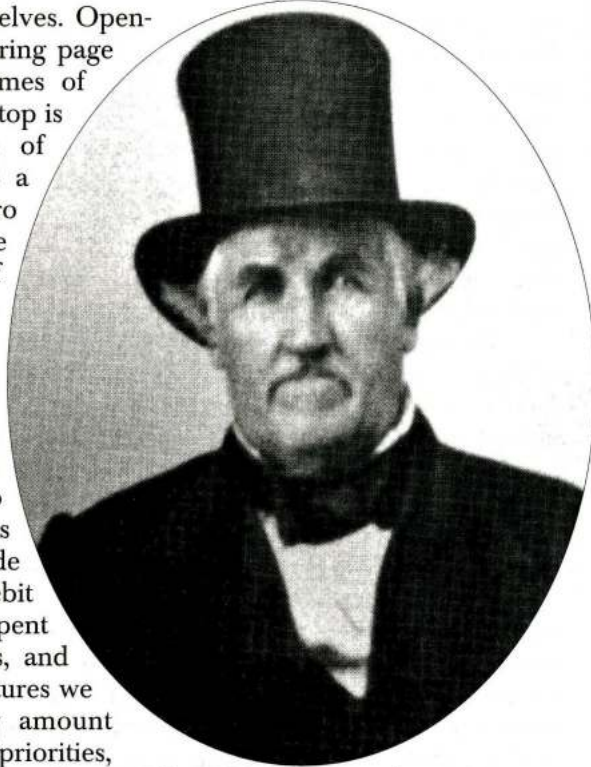
Weaver's use of the overwork system was so extensive and so nearly all-embracing that it is difficult to see how it was anything other than a conscious design on his part to try to make his slaves, both those he owned and those he hired, more willing workers. His intent, clearly, was to give his slaves a stake, however modest, in the success of his operations, to try to motivate them to work for, rather than against, his interests. His goal was to make his slaves disciplined and productive laborers without having to resort constantly to the use of physical coercion.

The overwork system also served the needs of the slaves, for they took the system and used it to enhance the quality of their own lives in ways that Weaver probably could never imagine. The slave master, of course, was obliged to provide his chattel with the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, but to bring modest luxury to their tables, to add an article of fine clothing to their wardrobes, to improve the furnishings in their cabins, Weaver's slaves turned in overwhelming numbers to the overwork system. Along the way, one suspects, the slaves gained self-respect. They could chose to do extra work or they could take their time off as leisure. Even in the simple act of accepting or rejecting the overwork system, slaves were achieving, in at least one small phase of their existence, some measure of choice.

Traditional practice allowed slaves to choose whether they would take overwork payments in cash or in goods from the ironmaster's store. If they chose cash, they could use the money to shop at other country stores, and this seems to have afforded the slaves a measure of protection against price gouging by the local storekeeper. If the slaves chose payments in merchandise, they could draw on their overwork immediately for things like coffee, sugar, tobacco, molasses, cloth, or articles of clothing. Conspicuous by its absence from the list of slave purchases was whiskey, which Weaver tried, not always successfully, to keep out of their hands.

One of the most significant things about the overwork accounts is the way in which they suggest how a sizable number of Weaver's slaves took advantage of the system to carve out something of a private and

individual life for themselves. Opening these ledgers and turing page after page with the names of slaves written across the top is very much a process of opening a window into a hidden past. The "Negro Books" afford a rare glimpse into the lives of antebellum southern slaves because they tell us what slaves chose to do with the resources they themselves controlled. They worked exceedingly hard to accumulate the sums recorded on the credit side of these ledgers. The debit side reveals how they spent these precious resources, and by tracing their expenditures we can learn a surprising amount about their values and priorities, about what was important to them and, frequently, to their families.



*William Weaver in November 1860.
An ambrotype by D. H. Placker.*

One example is Phill Eston, one of Buffalo Forge's master refiners. His account opened on April 1, 1830, with a transfer of \$65.27 to his credit from an earlier ledger (which has not survived) against a debit of only \$40.34. Phill regularly bypassed Weaver's annual clothing allotment for both himself and his wife, Betsy, and for each year that he did so he was credited with \$15 as payment in lieu of clothing. Easton raised a calf every year, which he sold to Weaver for \$2 (1830-34) or \$3 (after 1834) or \$5 (1850s), and he made extra ton-nages of iron over his weekly quota. By these means, Phill regularly put between \$20 and \$30 in overwork credit on Weaver's books each year during the 1830s. His balance on February 29, 1840, was \$100.28 1/2. Other slaves had similar debits and credits and some were constantly in debt.

The overwork system was but one technique Weaver employed to make Buffalo Forge a profitable enterprise, but it was critically important in maintaining a high-quality work force. Weaver generally got what he wanted from his slaves—a sufficient quality of high-quality iron produced

at a cost that allowed him to earn a profit on his sizable investment in Virginia. Weaver could have been a slaveowner without the extensive use of the overwork system, but he could not have been the successful ironmaster that he was without it. The slaves gained much less from the bargain, but they did earn recognition and limited reward, and considerable protection for themselves and their families against sale and abuse, and they secured the chance to do something tangible to improve their own lives and the lives of those they loved. Considering the limits imposed by the always degrading and frequently brutal system of slavery, these were not insignificant achievements.

William Weaver was a driven man, ceaselessly pursuing wealth and success; his personality included a hard-edged, almost ruthless quality. But his emphasis at Buffalo Forge was on stability, not innovation—in part because of the constraints of his slave labor system—and he largely ignored the technological innovations that were transforming the iron industry in the North. The maximum capacity of a facility like Buffalo Forge was around two hundred tons of bar iron per year—a small percentage of what one of the new (in the late 1850s) rolling mills could produce. Weaver's forge entered the Civil War—and Weaver demonstrated his thorough conversion to a Virginian in word and deed—with technology little changed since the Revolutionary War.

At the time of Weaver's death in late March 1863, Buffalo Forge was producing at maximum capacity and selling its iron to the Confederate government at forty times the price it commanded before secession. The end of the Confederacy sounded the death knell of the slavery system; on Friday, May 26, 1865, slavery officially ended at Buffalo Forge as a result of a U.S. military declaration. Iron production struggled on under the new conditions, but the bars drawn in November 1868 were the last. Buffalo Forge was never again put in operation. Former masters and former slaves went their varied ways as a result of the war, and a new era began in Rockbridge County and the South.