

**A BRIEF
EARLY HISTORY
of
ALBERENE
AS REMEMBERED
by
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I was born Daisy Lurlein Cook in Alberene in October, 1910.

Alberene, originally a small Albemarle County township named Beaverdam, was also the birthplace of the Alberene Soapstone Company, the singlemost important influence in the early growth and later demise of the community. Even the name, Alberene, reflects the interrelationship. The first three letters of Albemarle County and the "rene" from James Serene, the founder of the soapstone company, together form Alberene.

James Serene was originally in the marble business in Vermont, and was attracted to Virginia by the discovery of soapstone deposits. (I am not sure of the exact dates of the discovery.) Serene got in touch with a man named Schurtz who was thought to be the owner of the property where the soapstone deposit was located. Serene asked Schurtz to send soapstone samples to Vermont. When the samples did not arrive, Serene returned to Virginia and bought the property. It was believed that Serene was a purchase agent for Dan J. Carroll, a New York box manufacturer. A Mr. Boswick financed the purchase for Carroll and Serene. (The soapstone company records do not have any information about Boswick.) The company records state that D.J.Carroll was the first president of the development company, and also mention that one John G. Porter was a pioneer in the early exploitation of the soapstone deposits.

James Serene began removing the stone from the quarry about 1890. The stone was cut by gang saws into slabs. The slabs were hauled to North Garden, Virginia, by ox teams. Three wagons, each drawn by six oxen, made one trip each day. Austin Spears, a Caucasian, and Blacks Burl Thomas and Loftus Johnson were the ox team drivers. The slabs were made into laundry tubs in North Garden by Andrew Sutherland.

Later, mule teams replaced the oxen, and two trips a day were made to North Garden. The mule skinnners were Blacks Casear Smith and Henry Turner.

Housing for the soapstone workers and their families was erected in "Villages" under the direction of Sam Purcell of Greenwood. The villages were given picturesque names such as Dogtown, Stumptown, Quality Row, Gospel Hill, Church Hill, Sand Road, and Carter's Field.

Company officials lived on Maple Avenue. Some of the first Alberene Soapstone Company officials were

D. J. Carroll, President

James Serene, Manager

M. J. Flynn (nephew of Carroll), Time Keeper

Philo Felter, Office Manager

Presno (only name given), Quarry Foreman

(Sidney Giannini, not employed by the company, was Justice of the Peace at Alberene.)

Around 1902 or 1903, Serene left for New York, and Henry Lane of Esmont became the company Superintendent. Lane built the branch railroad from Esmont to Alberene. He also built the big "Company House" (which still exists today). The first story of the house is made of soapstone. Lane left the soapstone company to build the Virginia Railroad in the town of Altavista, located in Campbell County at the intersection of the Virginia and Southern Railroad tracks.

A large soapstone deposit was also found in 1890 near Schuyler (just across the Albemarle County line in Nelson County). A man named Ponton showed the deposits to Captain J. W. Foster, a civil engineer helping to lay out the town of Howardsville. (Captain Foster served with Mosby's Rangers in the Civil War.) It is said that Foster was in the Schuyler area to settle land disputes. Captain Foster began soapstone mining operations at the large Schuyler deposit. D. J. Carroll, first President of the Alberene Soapstone Company, bought Captain Foster's company and moved the Alberene's company operations from Alberene to Schuyler. Work at the Alberene quarry was discontinued in 1916.

A new grinding plant was built at Schuyler at the then enormous cost of over \$100,000 to replace the old facility at Damon (which was then abandoned). There were about 450 employees at the Schuyler mill and quarries, and two or three generations of several families were on the payroll. (A fact probably attributable more to the lenient credit policies of the "company store," the commissary, than to loyalty. Though many, no doubt, "owed their soul to the company store," in 35 years the company had no serious labor disputes.)

A small railroad carried workers from Alberene to Schuyler. Others were picked up along the way. The railroad, the Nelson and Albemarle (also known as the N and A), also carried passengers. The company also furnished transportation for employees and school children from Rockfish to Schuyler.

Around 1930 another corporation was formed to manage the Schuyler soapstone mining operations.

Some of the officers were:

John S. Graves, President

Dewey R. Fortune, Vice President, Production

Hugh M. Mathews, Vice President and Treasurer

C. E. Deane, Secretary

Percy Thacker, Assistant Secretary

In 1956, The Georgia Marble Company acquired controlling interest of the entire operation. (I believe a more recent acquisition was made by a Swedish firm.)

About soapstone...

The formal geology label for soapstone is "steatite." While all kinds of soapstone are a form of talc, the Alberene-Nelson stone is different in character and in the uses to which it is adapted from the soft soapstone of China and other countries. The Alberene-Nelson soapstone is weatherproof, heatproof, timeproof, acidproof, non-staining, and non-absorbent. Practically all research and chemical laboratories use the Alberene soapstone equipment. Electrical companies used the stone for mounting high tension apparatus. It is also widely used for stair treads, kitchen and laundry sinks, and hot plates. When it is highly polished it takes on the appearance of marble and is used for decorative effects in buildings.

The name "Alberene," sometimes used without capitalization, has come to be applied to soapstone of the Alberene-Nelson type wherever found. Deposits have been found in Sweden, Canada, and on the west coast of the United States. The deposits are small and none are being exploited commercially.

American Indians in the Ablerene/Schuyler locality were the first to use the soapstone, mostly for utensils and bowls. James Serene was the first to recognize the commercial possibilities of Virginia soapstone. D. J. Carroll is called the father of the industry and he expanded the uses of the stone.

Schuyler remains the only successful operation in the world for the quarrying and processing of the Alberene-type of hard soapstone.



ALBERENE SOAPSTONE PIONEERS — A man named Boswick (center) and James Serene (right) played important roles in the commercial development of the soapstone deposit at Alberene. John Lewis Martin of Faber, who said he knew the two men, identified them. Martin said Boswick, a New Yorker, helped finance the development and Serene, a Vermonter, was manager. P. M. Jones (left) of Culpeper was not associated with the operation but was a friend of the other two men. He had been a member of Ashby's and Mosby's "raiders" during the Civil War and married Sally Martin, daughter of Dr. George Martin, of North Garden. —Photo about 1900.



PART SOAPSTONE HOUSE — The first floor of this building, built at Alberene around the turn of the century, is made of soapstone. The structure, abandoned for some years, formerly was the "company house" (office) of the Alberene Stone Corporation of Virginia. Operations of the corporation shifted from Alberene to Schuyler in 1916. Many of the soapstone quarry and plant workers continued to live in Alberene while working in Schuyler. —Progress photo by Loving.