

Gold Mining in Orange County

From Historian Frank Walker in his book, *Remembering*:

“In 1782, Thomas Jefferson reported the discovery of a four-pound chunk of gold ore on the north bank of the Rappahannock four miles downstream of Fredericksburg. The ore yielded poorly though and news of the isolated discovery was overshadowed by the closing events of the Revolution. When wash deposits of gold were found on the White farm in western Spotsylvania County in 1806, the response was still relatively muted, even though the Whitehall mines became well-known locally. By contrast, in 1826, when some children on their way home from church kicked up a huge nugget on Ellwood, the William Jones farm in Orange County, gold fever broke out unchecked.

“Jones and his son-in-law, Spotsylvania County Judge John Coalter, began leasing mining sites on the farm for a share of the find. In one three-year period, a single miner paid them between \$3,000 and \$4,000 each year. Huge money at a time when Virginia’s economy was flagging. Additional strikes were reported in the Wilderness, then came the sure signs of a gold rush: New York investors, flim-flam artists, and con men.

“With all the hoopla that continues to accompany Orange County’s gold mining era, one might think that the local mining operations were outrageously profitable and made a monumental impact on the county economy. Initially, as easily accessible ‘placer deposits,’ or washed-out surface deposits, were being worked, that seemed likely. The miners used any of several simple, inexpensive washing techniques to separate the gold from the loose ore. The gold was collected, and it was off to the bank. That kind of fun, however, didn’t last long.

“It was almost 1830 before Orange County deposits were being systematically worked, and by 1850, all the easily mined Orange County gold was gone. From then on, large initial investments of capital were required to build the facilities to mine the ‘lode deposits,’ the hard-rock ore veins, and then separate the gold from it. Once built, those facilities were expensive to operate and maintain. Mine operators soon learned that it was more profitable to mine the investors than it was to mine the ground.¹

“Fifteen large mine sites were known to exist in the county, and they were worked at various times by over twenty different mining companies. In addition, there were a host of smaller operations. Some of the names of the better known mines were the Ambler, Chicago-Virginia, Coulter’s, Dickey, Grasty, Greenwood, Grymes, Jones, Melville, Orange Grove, Partridge, Randolph, Rapidan, Saunders, Seldon, Stuart, Vancluse (‘vaw-cluse’), Wilderness, Woodville, and Young.²

¹ Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 231.

² *Ibid.*, 231-232.

“The Virginia Mining Company of New York was the first of the corporate mining ventures in Orange County. Formed in 1831, it started working both the Grasty mine on Mine Run and the Vaucluse in the Wilderness. A few of the other companies that tried their luck here over the years were: the Liberty Mining Company of London, The Rapidan Gold Company of New York, the Central Virginia Mining and Milling Corporation, the Piedmont Mining and Metallurgical Corporation, the Melba Mining Company, The Orange Grove Mining Company, and the V-M Corporation.

“The Grasty, the Chicago-Virginia, and the Dickey mines were unusual in that while they were well-known operations, they were all located along Mine Run, west of what evolved as the gold mining district of the county. The gold fields of Orange County are usually thought of as being in that area of the Wilderness east of Locust Grove, with the largest concentration of good producing mines being between today’s Route 3 and the Rapidan River. The gold-pyrite belt which was being mined actually yields workable deposits in a large number of places from Maryland through North Carolina, with some traces of it appearing as far south as Alabama.

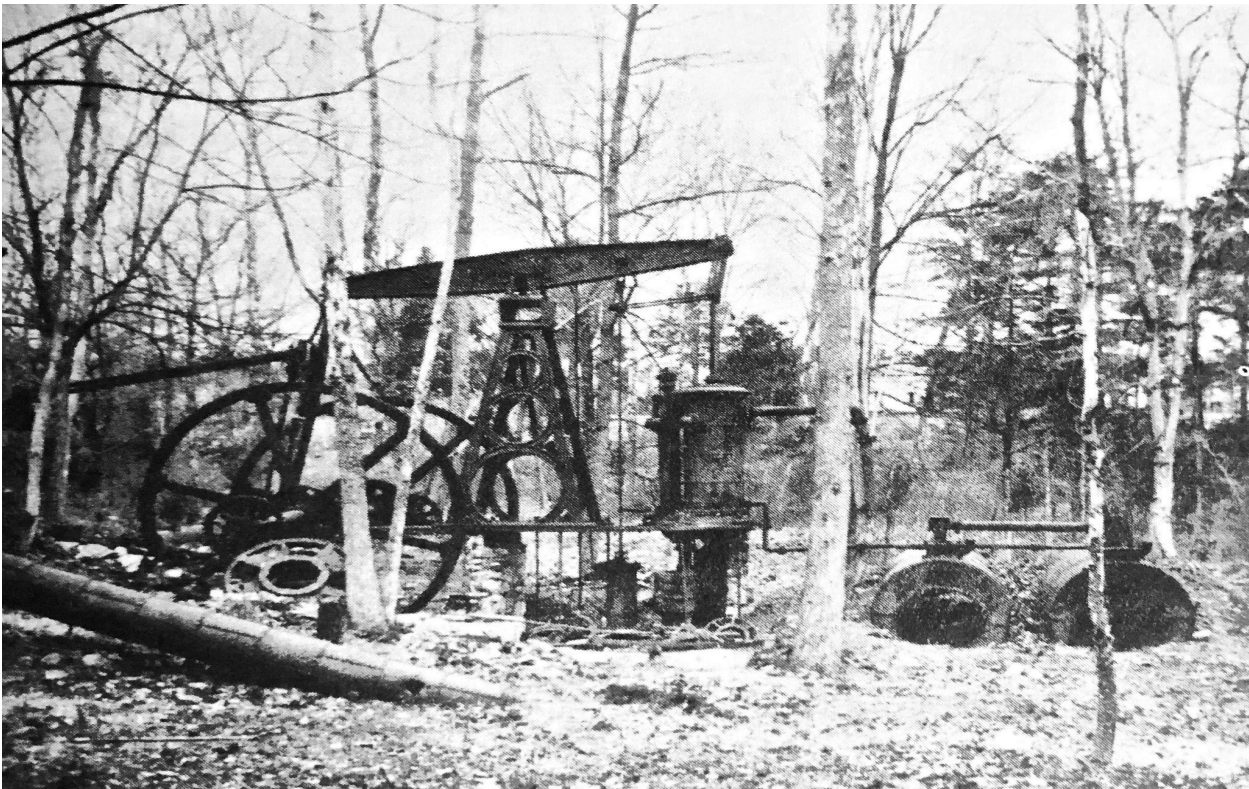
“The peak year for Virginia gold production turned out to be 1849. In that year just a little under \$130 thousand in gold came into U.S. mints from Virginia. That was the same year, however, in which those mints received a staggering \$5 million plus in gold from California. Production in Orange County and in all of Virginia declined in the years following 1849, as California’s large and easily processed gold deposits lured investors and workers away. Everything pretty much shut down during the Civil War, and only a few of the better mines were reopened after it. Fewer still lasted into the Great Depression. The last of the large Orange County mines, the Melville and the Vaucluse, were worked off and on until 1937.”³

A link to Frank Walker’s Talk on Gold Mining:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVbAczW3mxA>

³ *Ibid.*, 232

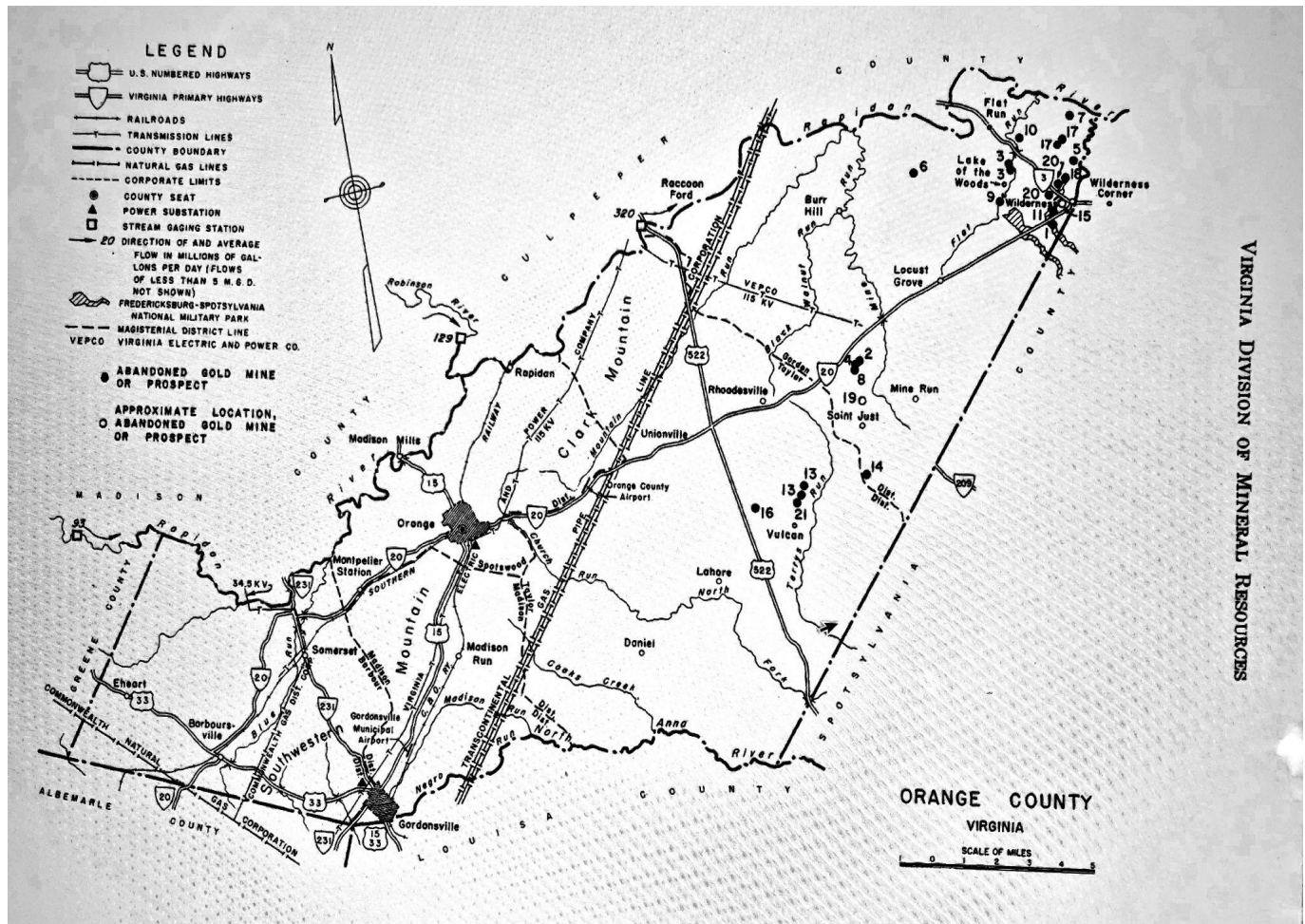
The Vacluse Gold Mine, 1929



“The Vacluse Gold Mine’s 120hp Cornish steam engine and its boilers, photographed in 1929 just before their removal to Henry Ford’s Michigan museum. The mine operators had long ago switched to other sources of power, and such shelters as there had been for this abandoned equipment had disappeared. Photograph from the Orange County Historical Society files. “⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

Photo from the *Virginia Division of Mineral Resources*: ⁵



The legend indicates:

- Solid black dot is “Abandoned Gold Mine or Prospect”
- Clear circle is “Approximate Location, Abandoned Gold Mine or Prospect”

Please note the areas east of Highway 522 for the communities of St. Just and Mine Run, Lake of the Woods, Wilderness, and Wilderness Corner towards the Rapidan River.

⁵ Palmer C. Sweet. “Gold in Virginia: Virginia Division of Mineral Resources Publication 19.” Virginia Division of Mineral Resources, Google, Accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.dmme.virginia.gov/commercedocs/PUB_19.pdf