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Deep River Bayonet Operations of Heck, Brodie & Company during the Civil War

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Coal and iron deposits near the Deep River in Chatham County, North Carolina, invited exploitation even before the Revolution. Efforts to establish mining and manufacturing operations there reached their apogee during the Civil War, when a number of companies attempted to establish ordnance operations for the Confederate cause at Lockville, Gorgas, Endor, Goldston, and Ore Hill. One of the active players in the area was the entrepreneur Jonathan McGee Heck, who thrived in rapidly assembling successively larger enterprises. Four others with whom Heck had dealings and are part of this historical sketch were William L. Brodie, Reese H. Butler, William S. Downer, and Silas Burns. This paper is intended to be a preliminary report on this Chatham County ordnance materiel operation, focusing on Heck's business activities before and after coming to Chatham County and touching upon the complex interrelations among several of the businesses.

Biographical Background

Jonathan McGee Heck, a Virginian with a background in the law, was commissioned Lieutenant Colonel in the Virginia Militia early in May 1861.¹ His regiment, the 25th Virginia Infantry, fought near Rich Mountain, Virginia (now West Virginia) in July 1861.² In a famished condition, the regiment

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was surrounded and surrendered at Beverly to Union forces led by Major General George B. McClellan (the "Young Napoleon," whom President Lincoln later elevated to command the entire Northern army). Heck's regiment was paroled and, apparently through McClellan's dispensation, Heck was permitted to bring his family through the Northern lines.³ The terms of parole for the regiment were that each man would subscribe to an oath not to bear arms or serve in a military capacity again during the rebellion.⁴

William L. Brodie of Warren County, North Carolina, was a financial man, "a gentleman of wealth," who had "lost the sight of one eye and [was] in bad health," when he joined Jonathan Heck as a one-third owner in the Heck, Brodie & Company.⁵ Brodie was a Captain in the North Carolina Reserves at the end of the war.

Reese H. Butler of Atlanta, a Brooklyn-trained expert machinist, had been an armorer at the United States Armory at Harpers Ferry before the war and worked there with William Downer.⁶ Butler's specialty was setting up machinery and launching manufacturing operations. In 1861, Butler managed the bayonet and mountings department at the Richmond Armory, and went to the Fayetteville Arsenal to set up the rifle-making machinery which, under William Downer's command, was relocated there from Harpers Ferry.⁷ In 1862, Butler went to Atlanta to direct the installation and start-up of machinery at the Spiller & Burr revolver factory there.⁸ In January 1864, the Confederate government bought the Spiller & Burr business, and in February Edward N. Spiller, a commission merchant from Baltimore, became a part-owner of the Endor Ironworks with William Downer. At that time Butler became a one-third owner in the Raleigh Bayonet Factory with Heck and Brodie.⁹ After Appomatox, Butler returned to a devastated Atlanta to operate the Porter & Butler Foundry, of which Edward Spiller was a silent partner.¹⁰ Butler ran

unsuccessfully for the Atlanta city council and later moved his machine shop to Gainesville, Georgia.

William S. Downer, a native of Pennsylvania, was a clerk at the United States Armory at Harpers Ferry before the war.¹¹ Commissioned in the Confederate Army, he was at different times the Superintendent of the Virginia Armory and the Richmond Arsenal.¹² In February 1864 he resigned as Superintendent of Armories and, while maintaining his rank as major, was sent to coordinate Deep River ordnance production.¹³ Also in February 1864, Downer joined others from Richmond, including Edward N. Spiller, and bought the Endor Iron Company.¹⁴ After selling the Endor works to Heck's Lockville Mining & Manufacturing Company in August 1864, Downer and others incorporated the Gorgas Mining & Manufacturing Company in December 1864.¹⁵ William L. Brodie and Dr. Thomas D. Hogg, an owner of Lockville Mining while also the head of the State ordnance department, were also incorporators.

Silas Burns had come to Raleigh from Massachusetts in the 1830s and built fifty cars for the North Carolina Railroad as it was being completed in 1854.¹⁶ In 1861, Burns managed the Novelty Ironworks at West and Hargett Streets in Raleigh, employing twenty-two men.¹⁷ After Heck and his partners bought the ironworks, Burns moved to Chatham County with a view to establishing a machine shop and probably a rolling mill at Lockville, where he later had a machine shop.¹⁸ Between 1863 and 1869, Burns appears to have maintained some undefined business relationship with Heck in Chatham County. In 1868 he operated on the fringes of a shady deal promoted by Heck to give the State 25 acres of land in Chatham County as a site for its first penitentiary, provided that the State buy 8000 acres of Heck's land in Moore and Harnett Counties.¹⁹ During the Reconstruction period, Burns became the State Superintendent of Public Works and was considered to be a carpet-bagger.²⁰ Although Burns does not have a central role in this article, he was a link in establishing the location of Heck's original bayonet operation in Raleigh and the planned operation at Lockville.

The Raleigh Bayonet Factory

Perhaps as early as June 1862, Heck went to Richmond, where he contracted with Captain William S. Downer of the Ordnance Bureau to manufacture 10,000 bayonets at a factory in Raleigh.²¹ Where this factory was located in Raleigh is not documented; however, soon after contracting to manufacture bayonets, Heck entered into a one-year agreement to purchase a foundry-machine

shop, which the authors think was an ironworks at West and Hargett Streets, known as Novelty Ironworks in 1861 and managed by Silas Burns.

In this agreement, signed on 5 August 1862, Heck joined with Orlando Shay and Bailey P. Williamson as equal partners to purchase the foundry-machine shop previously owned by A.A. Pitman & Company in Raleigh.²² Shay, who had been an auditor's clerk in Richmond, was to keep the books; Williamson was to run the shop; and Heck, with undefined duties, was to share equally in the profits. As Shay, Williamson & Company, they operated the North State Iron & Brass Works, making mountings and brass uniform buttons.²³

There is a good possibility that the Raleigh Bayonet Factory used the factory site of the North State Iron & Brass Works. Both businesses had very similar letterheads, using the same kind of paper and the same type font,²⁴ and, of course, Heck was an owner in both works; however, it cannot yet be concluded from available direct documentation that both operations used the same factory site. One reference from 1913 is unintentionally ambiguous but indicates that Heck & Williamson manufactured buckles and spurs and that some sort of manufacturing was undertaken at the Deaf & Dumb Institute.²⁵ There is no particular reason for buckles, spurs, or uniform buttons to be manufactured at an ironworks, but the production of bayonets required furnaces and heavy mechanical trip hammers to forge the blades and join the blade to the base and it seems more appropriate for this work to be done at an ironworks. Thus, it is the authors' best guess that the Raleigh Bayonet Factory was located at West and Hargett Streets.

In June 1863, Heck contracted again with Captain Downer to produce 35,000 additional bayonets of a different design. Both bayonet contracts were plagued by shortages of iron, which was to be furnished by the Ordnance Bureau, no doubt from the

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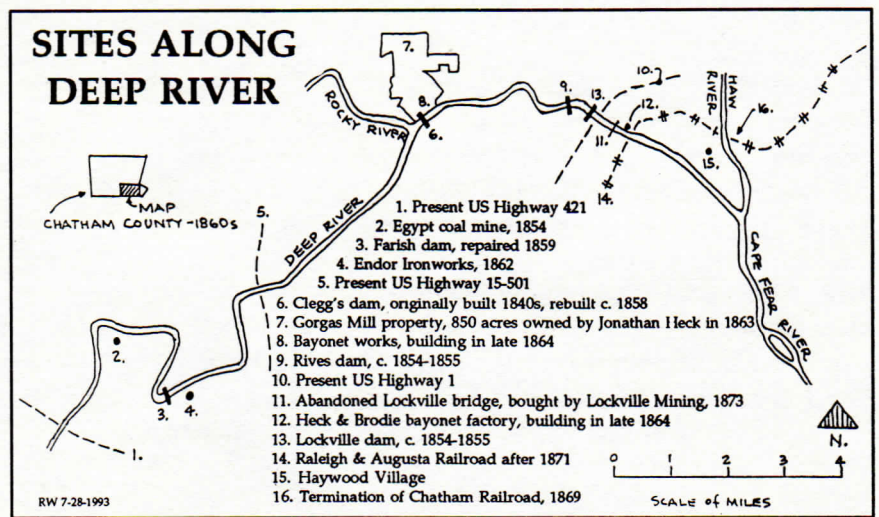
Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond—the South's premier iron producer. After securing the second bayonet contract as an individual, Heck realized that the contract was too large for him to continue as sole contractor and he took two partners: William Brodie and Reese Butler. Heck and Brodie were equal partners by investment; Butler, who lacked capital, contributed his share in "sweat equity," a fact that provides a good indication of his expertise.²⁶ The firm then operated the Raleigh Bayonet Factory under the name of Heck, Brodie & Company.

Operations on the Deep River

By early 1864, the Deep River region was thought to be the most militarily secure location for ironmaking in the Confederate States—which it later proved to be—although it was not until early 1865 that the Confederate Congress belatedly authorized construction of a foundry and arsenal in Chatham County and began, but did not complete, a blast furnace near Goldston.²⁷

In December 1863, the Lockville Mining and Manufacturing Company was formed, with Jonathan Heck the driving force within the company. It included as stockholders the president of the Raleigh & Gaston Railroad; the president, directors, and large stockholders in the Chatham Railroad; the head of North Carolina's Ordnance Department; and several manufacturers who furnished rifles to the state ordnance department.²⁸ After buying the Endor furnace, Lockville Mining was to produce pig iron at Endor, and possibly other places, and to furnish that iron to Heck, Brodie & Company's bayonet factory and Lockville Mining's rolling mill-to-be on the Deep River. The Raleigh & Gaston Railroad, badly in need of replacement rails, and the Chatham Railroad, then being built, would be supplied with rails from Heck's Lockville rolling mill. Kemp Battle's Chatham Railroad had graded an 18-mile route between Cary and Haywood but needed 20 miles of track to complete the road between Raleigh and Haywood by the end of the war.²⁹ In reality, the Chatham had no other source of rail but from cannibalized railroads elsewhere in the state or the Lockville rolling mill, which had not yet been built.

In February 1864 William S. Downer resigned as Superintendent of Armories in Richmond and was sent to coordinate Deep River ordnance production. At the same time, he joined others from Richmond to buy the Endor Ironworks, which had not produced satisfactorily before then. In August 1864, the Lockville Mining and Manufacturing Company



bought the Endor works from Downer, Spiller, and others.³⁰ The authors suspect that a Richmond rifle-making operation and possibly a bayonet-making operation was planned for relocation to Deep River, under Downer's direction. In September 1864, a month after buying the Endor furnace, Heck told the Ordnance Bureau that he planned to move the Raleigh bayonet operations to Deep River so as to be close to a source of iron and coal.³¹ Reese Butler at this time went to Deep River to build a foundry, blacksmith shop, and machine shop to serve the bayonet operation. In October 1864, Captain William Brodie and Lieutenant Reese Butler, commanding Company A, City Battalion, North Carolina Reserves, were authorized to bring sixty Union Army prisoners as volunteers from the Salisbury, North Carolina, and Danville, Virginia, military prisons to operate their bayonet factory on Deep River.³² In his letter of November 1864, Butler does not mention prison laborers; he does describe the site he was developing but comes no closer to identifying its location than 36 miles from Raleigh and about 10 miles from Egypt, with letters to be directed to him at Lockville, Chatham County.³³ On the map, Gorgas is 36 miles from Raleigh; Lockville is 10 miles from Egypt.

In December 1864, Downer, Brodie, and others incorporated the Gorgas Mining & Manufacturing Company.³⁴ Gorgas was located in the northeast quadrant of the confluence of Rocky River with Deep River; it apparently was named in honor of Brigadier General Josiah Gorgas, the head of the Confederate Ordnance Bureau throughout the war. The authors are doubtful that any manufacturing took place at Gorgas before the war ended. A newspaper article of 1913 indicates that a large grindstone for grinding bayonets was moved from Gorgas to Pittsboro to become a stepping ring around the village well.³⁵

Conclusions

It is not known precisely where the Heck & Brodie works were being built or what facilities were built at Gorgas by the end of the war. Some building foundations have been found where it is believed the Heck & Brodie bayonet factory was. These are near a small hydro-electric plant now located in the structure of the former downstream lock at Lockville. The remains appear to be too fragmented now for a reasonable interpretation of the site. The authors are seeking a piece of documentation to provide triangulation for a specific site.

Heck was a very well known figure in Raleigh after the war; his activities from 1863 into the 1870s are covered in the story of the Endor Ironworks, although his role there was never connected publicly. The ironworks was merely a pawn in a vast conglomerate assembled by Jonathan Heck. By 1870 the ironworks, as part of Lockville Mining & Manufacturing, had been sold twice, first to the Deep River Manufacturing Company and then, in a sheriff's sale on the courthouse steps in Pittsboro, for \$1,000.³⁶

The chance intersection of two independent research interests revealed many of the same characters in both research lines and led to this joint effort. The authors continue to investigate the activities of the armorers at the Harpers Ferry Armory before the war, their interrelationships during the war, and their profit-sharing in various businesses while maintaining military rank.

NOTES

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- Ibid.*, W.S. Downer to Col. Josiah Gorgas.
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