



CARDINAL NEWS 250

At Chiswell's mines, a mixed crew of unwilling hands dug lead ore for patriot victory

Enslaved men and white criminals worked side-by-side at the lead mines in Wythe County to produce ammunition.



by [Randy Walker](#)
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Close-up of an conjectural sketch of an enslaved miner wearing state-issued clothing. By Jim Mullins

The year 2026 marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Cardinal News has embarked on a three-year project to tell the little-known stories of Virginia's role in the march to independence. This project is supported, in part, by a grant from the [Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission](#). You can [sign up to receive a free monthly newsletter](#) with updates. Find all our stories from this project on [the Cardinal News 250 page](#).

They were some of the most desperate men in Virginia — enslaved men caught escaping, white criminals, men owned by the state or rented from private owners.

Bristol was enslaved on William Mountague's plantation in Lancaster County. Hearing of Lord Dunmore's offer of freedom, he tried to cross the Rappahannock to join Dunmore's fleet at Gwynn's Island. But Bristol never reached British lines. He was captured, taken to jail, and then to the mines.

Thomas Johnston (or Johnson) was a horse thief; William Smith, alias William Nugent, passed counterfeit money; John Dean was a robber. All took service in the mines in exchange for pardons.

In 1778, the state paid Elizabeth Reade 300 pounds for Peter, already rented from her and working at the mines.

Sweating in summer, freezing in winter, Black and white men swung pickaxes shoulder to shoulder in pits 70 feet deep, mining lead for the Revolutionary armies. Some 30 underfed men dug the ore and worked a nearby smelting furnace, with a few enslaved women — their duties not recorded — serving as well. Armed guards watched for escape attempts, while anxious militia colonels fought off Loyalist plots to seize the mines.



Mine manager Col. Charles Lynch may have dealt out summary justice — “Lynch’s law” — to suspected Loyalists. His last name became one of the most feared words in the English language.

Because the mines were operated under state contract, Lynch was ultimately responsible to Virginia governors Patrick Henry (1776-1779) and Thomas Jefferson (1779-1781). The story of Chiswell's lead mines is the paradox of the American Revolution in microcosm. Many of the lead balls that tore into the Redcoats at the climactic Battle of Yorktown, thereby securing American freedom, probably came from a mine operated largely with slave labor.



A conjectural sketch of an enslaved miner wearing state-issued clothing. By Jim Mullins.

In the 1750s, John Chiswell, a member of the House of Burgesses, was traveling along the New River in what is now Wythe County. To avoid a confrontation with Indians — or so the story goes — he ducked into a small cave, later dubbed “Chiswell’s Hole,” where he discovered rich mineral deposits.

In 1761, Chiswell set up a mining operation on the south side of the river. The partners were Chiswell; William Byrd III, a Burgess, military officer and notorious gambler; John Robinson, colony treasurer; and, briefly, Lt. Gov. Francis Fauquier. Early attempts sputtered, so in 1763, Chiswell traveled to England and hired mine manager William Herbert and a crew of experienced Welsh miners.

Productivity took off “because of the importation of Welsh miners who actually knew what they’re doing,” said Jim Mullins, a New River Valley historian and student of the Revolutionary period.

Calamity struck in 1766. Traveling home to Williamsburg from the mines, John Chiswell stopped at Mosby Tavern in Cumberland County. In an alcohol-fueled dispute, he allegedly ran a man through with his sword. While awaiting trial for murder, Chiswell himself died, apparently by suicide. John Robinson, the colony’s treasurer, died after having made illegal loans to friends and entities including the mine company. Byrd, the surviving partner, was left to sort out the mess.

The workforce evidently included both Welsh and enslaved men, because after Robinson’s death, Byrd bought 36 enslaved miners from Robinson’s estate, according to Randal Hall’s “Mountains on the Market.”

Aside from the lead mines, frontier-era Wythe County had little more than a courthouse, a powder magazine at Fort Chiswell, a tavern or two, a dry goods store, and a handful of scattered farms. “Most of the Native Americans had moved out of here at the beginning of the 18th century,” according to Michael Gillman, manager of heritage sites and Homestead museum operations for Wytheville. “This was basically just hunting land for the Shawnee and Cherokee.”

In 1775, with war looming, the legislature authorized the committee of safety for Fincastle County to negotiate with the mine owners to manufacture lead at state expense, according to Hall. (Part of now-extinct Fincastle County became Montgomery in 1776, and part of Montgomery became Wythe in 1790.)

By October 1776, manager John Callaway had ten tons ready for shipment to the Continental army. The Virginia Gazette hoped it would be “unerringly directed against our enemies.” The unwilling work force consisted mostly of enslaved men and convicts, along with the Welsh.

Charles and Kitt, of Stafford County, tried to escape slavery in 1776 by hijacking a schooner and forcing white boatmen to steer them to the British. Their death sentences were commuted and they were sentenced to the mines. Likewise, Ned, Reuben and James of Northampton County went to the mines after having death sentences commuted, leaving the salt air of the Chesapeake for the dust of the lead pit.

In 1776, state authorities ordered Peter Terrel to hire four guards and move 19 enslaved people from the public jail — location not specified, possibly Williamsburg — to the mines. This group included Bristol, the captured escapee, described in later documents as 5 feet, 9 inches tall, of “spare make” and “able and fit for labor when well.” The convicts probably trudged their weary way west overseen by guards on horseback.

“As masters learned of the disposition of their runaway property — taken from the jails to the mines — they often petitioned the legislature for the slaves’ return,” Hall wrote. “The legislators sometimes obliged, but at other times they kept the slaves and offered payment of rent instead.”

For the use of Bristol, the legislature approved compensation to owner William Mountague (also spelled Montague) of £8 for 1776, £10 for 1777, £20 for 1778 and £60 for 1779, reflecting wartime inflation.

In 1777, Petersburg merchant Duncan Rose was authorized to buy 12 enslaved men for the mines, according to Hall. Owner John Fox sold Ned, a former sailor, and Ralph, a sawyer and ship carpenter, to the state for £400. On Nov. 5 the state bought Robin from Benjamin Powell for £150 and Ned from Douglas Willet for £130 after their capture from the enemy. In 1779, the Commissary of Stores issued clothing for 30 male and five female slaves at the mines. The five females may have included Phebe, Sue and Sarah, mentioned in a list of enslaved persons at the mines. It’s possible they tended adjacent cornfields.

An enslaved man named Aberdeen arrived with a different back story. Owned by a Loyalist, he chose to defect to the Patriots. Perhaps envisioning himself holding a musket and fighting for his freedom, instead he was sent to the mines to wield a pick and shovel.

The workers probably slept in log barracks, according to Mullins.

What was a work day like at Chiswell’s lead mines? Picture a vast hole in the ground with men swinging pickaxes, handling shovels, and hauling the ore up in baskets and bags, amid explosions, clouds of dust and smoke, and the smell of burning sulfur. Thomas Jefferson, in “Notes on the State of Virginia,” says miners used gunpowder to loosen the horizontal veins of ore.

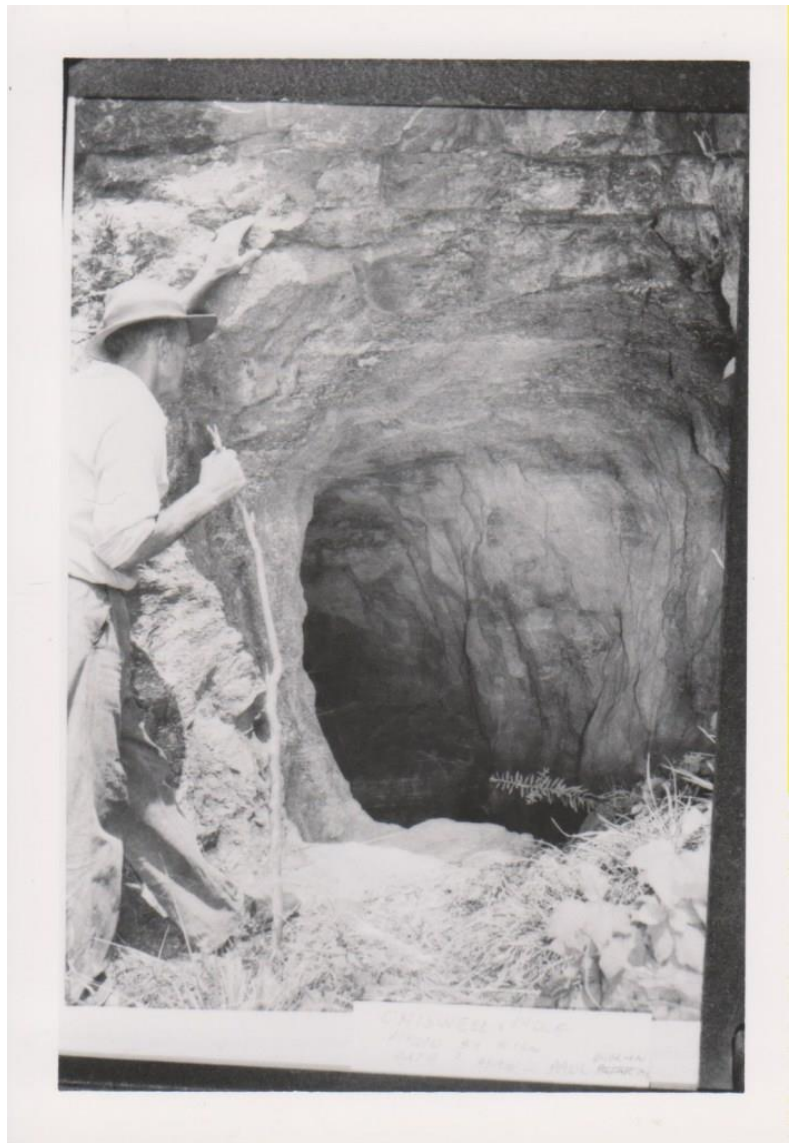
The furnace was a mile from the mine. The ore was hauled on wagons to the riverbank, canoed to the opposite shore, then dumped into wagons and hauled to the furnace.

A water-powered mill broke up the ore. The ore was washed to get the dirt off, then dumped into a wood-fired furnace. The molten metal flowed into molds to form 150-pound bars. A hundred pounds of washed ore yielded 50 to 80 pounds of metal.

Charles Lynch was appointed superintendent in 1777 and oversaw the rebuilding of the furnace in 1778. A tough taskmaster, Lynch “pushed production as hard as possible,” Hall wrote.

Lead was transported 130 miles along a “good road” to Lynch’s Ferry (later Lynchburg), then shipped down the James to Westham, west of Richmond, according to Jefferson. A “factory” at Westham, established by Baron von Steuben, made ammunition.

It’s not clear whether musket balls were manufactured at the mines, and if so, how. Mullins has not found evidence of manufacturing. On the other hand, William Herbert was familiar with the shot-tower method pioneered by William Watts in England. In shot towers, molten lead, which melts at 621 degrees Fahrenheit, is poured through a sieve into a tub of water. The 1807 Jackson Ferry shot tower that still stands near the old mine may have been built on the foundation of an earlier tower, Gillman said. Musket balls can also be made by pouring molten lead into a mold, a low-tech operation which can be done around a campfire.



Among those needing ammunition were guards at the mine. It was likely protected by blockhouses, log structures with overhanging tops. Militiamen were there, in part, to guard against slave revolt. The management may have feared the prospect of disaffected Welshmen conspiring with the enslaved men and convicts, according to Hall.

Given that many workers had already tried to escape slavery, it’s not surprising that some kept trying. In 1778, Charles escaped from the mines and made it as far as Stafford County before capture. George made it as far as Powhatan. In 1779, Luke, who had been purchased from an Eastern Shore owner, was caught heading east in Chesterfield County.

Others may have rebelled through sabotage. In 1833 a militia guard applying for a pension recalled that the enslaved men “had to be closely watched” and “either the tories, Indians or negroes set fire to the furnace house...” The same night a ferry boat and a canoe used to transport ore were unmoored and set adrift down the river, according to Hall.

On edge against revolt from within, managers faced Loyalists from without. Loyalism was widespread in the upper New River Valley, and what is now southern Wythe County was among the “most disaffected” parts of the state, according to Jefferson. Many Western frontiersmen felt scant loyalty to the wealthy Eastern aristocrats who led the Patriot cause.

In 1780, Col. William Preston, in charge of protecting the mines, alerted Jefferson to groups who planned to “disturb the peace,” and Jefferson urged Preston to protect the mines, according to Emory Evans in “Trouble in the Backcountry.” In June, 200 Tories were reportedly plotting to seize the mines. Throughout June and July militia pursued the Tories and “hanged, shot and whipped insurgents and seized their horses and cattle.”

A spy, John Wyatt, infiltrated a Tory group on the New River and discovered a plot to seize the mines. Patriot militia captured almost 60 Tories, whipped some, imprisoned some, and conscripted others for the Continental army.

In 1780, Lynch helped “put down a threatened uprising in the area that is now southwestern Virginia, where fears of cooperation among English agents, Loyalists, slaves and Indians kept the settlers in a more or less constant state of fear,” according to his entry in American National Biography.

Lynch “appears to have extracted confessions and dispensed his own brand of justice,” Evans wrote. “It is not known what happened to these men. Lynch commented that some ‘may require that they should be made Exampels of’.” It cannot be proved that Charles Lynch arbitrarily hanged suspected persons without trial, but posterity has attached the phrase ‘lynch law’ to such activity, probably with some reason.”.

One thing he was not accused of, according to the Avoca Museum in Altavista, home of Charles Lynch, is singling out African-Virginians. If there was an ethnic group who incurred his special wrath, it was the Welsh.

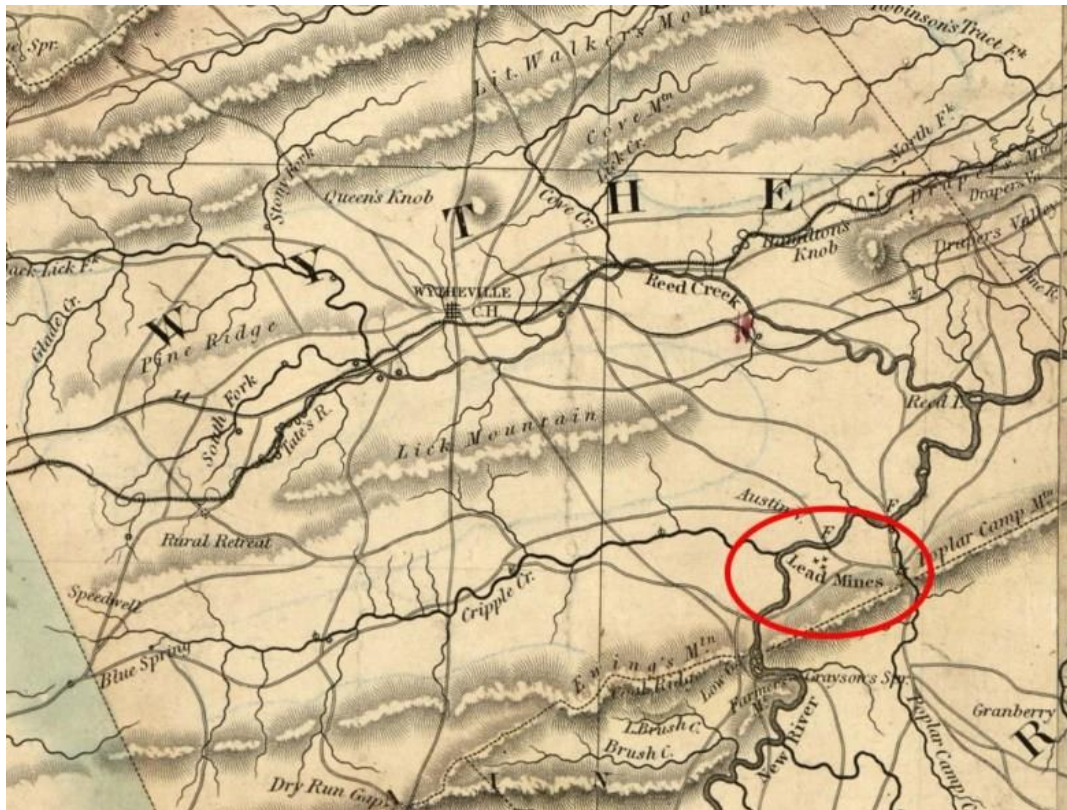
With Lynch driving production, the mine kept Virginia forces adequately supplied until 1781, when the vein of ore waned at the worst possible moment. Virginia, which had seen little fighting in the early stages of the war, was invaded by Benedict Arnold and Lord Cornwallis.

“It is impossible to give you an Idea of the Distress we are in for want of Lead,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in April 1781. Meanwhile, the workmen and managers were in distress themselves “for want of meat,” William Preston reported to Jefferson. Pressed by management, crews unearthed more ore.

The Brown Bess smoothbore musket of the Revolutionary era fired a round ball weighing 1.1 ounce at 400 to 500 meters per second. Some of the muskets and rifles fired by the Patriots and French at the Battle of Yorktown in the fall of 1781 were almost certainly loaded with rounds from Chiswell’s mines. Cornwallis surrendered on Oct. 19, 1781.

With conflict winding down, the mines were returned to private management. The state-owned laborers, who had helped the colonies win their freedom, were not given theirs. A report from 1783 listed 30 adult African Americans on hand, including Phebe, age 30, who had three children — suggesting a note of domestic comfort amid the male atmosphere.

Later owners included the Austin brothers, who gave the site its current name of Austinville. Lead mining continued under a succession of corporate entities until 1981.



An 1859 map of Virginia shows the location of the lead mines along the south bank of the New River in southern Wythe County. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

Bristol, transported to the mines in 1776, appears once more in the historical record. On May 14, 1785, Thomas Meriwether published a notice in the Virginia Gazette. “TWENTY POUNDS REWARD WILL be given, for apprehending and delivering to me, two negro men, CAESAR and BRISTOL, alias BRISTER, or Ten Pounds for each of them.” As Bristol is described as “formerly the property” of William Mountague, he had evidently been sold. Bristol apparently never stopped thirsting for freedom. When he “ran away” from the mine in 1785, he was wearing an old brown cloth coat and an old pair of leather breeches. He took with him a new blue coat, a new white waistcoat and breeches, and a new blanket — his proceeds from nine years of hard labor. Whether he was captured, reached freedom somewhere, or died trying, is unknown.

Lead ore is sometimes laced with silver, but at Chiswell’s ore pit there was precious little of the precious metal. But there was at least one silver lining in the dreary, dull, dismal, depressing, but dramatic saga of Virginia’s revolutionary lead mines.

Aberdeen, mentioned above, was the enslaved man whose Loyalist owner, John Goodridge, ordered his “Servants” to join the British fleet in Norfolk. Taking his fate into his own hands, Aberdeen instead delivered himself to a Patriot, and “in May 1776 was taken from Williamsburg by Colo. Lynch to the Led Mines, where he has labour’d Honestly Ever since — for which Service & the Leaving his P.[previous?] Master & friends he grounds his hope, your Honourable House will give him his freedom.” In 1783, the House of Delegates granted his petition. After seven years of hard labor in Chiswell’s lead mines, Aberdeen was a free man.

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