



History

Home of the Official
Gold Mining Interpretive
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While gold mining is usually associated with America's Old West, gold was actually mined in Virginia – and Fauquier County - many years before the California Gold Rush of 1849. The first known mention of gold in Virginia was in 1782, when Thomas Jefferson wrote in his Notes of the State of Virginia that he knew of a “single instance of gold found in this state” – a lump of ore “found on the North of the Rappahannoc, about four miles below the falls” that contained 17 pennyweight (dwt.) of gold.

What is widely known as the Gold-Pyrite Belt runs along the eastern edge of the Appalachian Mountains from Maryland to Alabama. In Virginia, this belt encompasses an area of some 4000 square miles, starting near Point of Rocks on the Potomac River and running southwest to the North Carolina state line. The Virginia section of the belt varies in width from 15 to 25 miles and measures 200 miles in length.

This gold belt passes through southeastern Fauquier County in the Morrisville/Goldvein/Sumerduck areas. It is here where approximately 19 gold mines and prospects existed between 1830 and 1940. American Indians and early European settlers discovered small quantities of the precious metal, but the Goldvein area did not attract serious prospectors and miners until the early 1800's.

By the early 1800's, prospectors were panning for gold in the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers and their tributaries, no doubt influenced by gold production in other areas of the east coast. Eventually over the years, mining progressed to the digging out of exposed ore or lode mining, and finally with the excavation of deep shafts in the search of veins of gold hidden in the earth.

A minor gold rush occurred along the east coast in the early 19th century. In 1799, outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, gold was found at the John Reed farm in Carrarus County and mining operations began soon thereafter. In 1806, the White Hall Mine opened just across the Rappahannock River in Spotsylvania County.

By the 1830s, Virginia and her sister states of the South had become the major gold producing region in the nation. During the 1830's, gold production in North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia amounted to over \$1,000,000 per year.

Virginia mines began to send an increasing amount of gold to the Philadelphia Mint: in 1829 121 ounces were deposited and in 1833 5,031 ounces were sent. Even after the California Gold Rush, the mines in Virginia remained very active. In 1849, Virginia mines produced an all time high of 6259 ounces, although production quickly diminished until nearly all mining stopped due to the Civil War. In the years between 1829 and 1860, Virginia mines sent 74,865 ounces to the mint, worth over \$1,500,000, plus an unknown amount that ended up in private hands.

Mining operations began in Fauquier County with the opening of the Union Gold Mine, off present-day Sumerduck Road, which was chartered in 1818. This operation was well underway by 1833, with a 5,000-foot mineshaft dug under the Fauquier soil by English workers from Cornwall were brought in to work the mine. However, by 1869, the mine had been worked out, and was abandoned

The most successful of all the Fauquier mines, the Franklin Gold Mine along Deep Run began operations by 1825. . Opened originally as an “open cut” or strip mine, gold was plentiful enough to be gathered from close to the surface. From its first year in operation until the onset of the War Between the States, the Franklin Mine reportedly produced \$1,200,000 worth of gold. But it never had an easy time; in 1841, it was sold in Fredericksburg to settle its debts, including back pay to nearly 50 miners and other employees. The financial condition improved by 1850, allowing for the purchase of even more mining equipment; but a fire a year later destroyed two expensive new buildings and the equipment inside them.

The Liberty Mine, another early Fauquier mine along Sumerduck Road, was first mentioned in 1834. After operating profitably for about 15 years, the Liberty Hill mine was closed in the early 1850s. In the 1850s, many Virginia mines were bought and operated by English companies. The Liberty Mine along with the famous Vaucluse Mine in Orange County were such mines. New equipment was brought in to recover the gold, including a 12 stamp mill, a large crusher, two rolling ball mills weighing 1,000 pounds each, ore grinding machines and a 70-horsepower engine.

Other mines operating before the Civil War were the Cool Springs and Wyckoff mines. The Wyckoff Gold Mine was started by a group of New York investors in 1853, but shortly after operations began, a lawsuit was filed by the former company president against his partners. As a result, the 813-acre property was later sold for about \$9 an acre to settle the lawsuit.

Even though the Virginia gold mining industry ceased during the Civil War, it quickly started up again. In the three decades following the war, 14 different mines were opened in Fauquier County alone. Some shut down quickly, but some continued to mine the precious ore until well into the 20th Century. All ultimately closed, but while they were in business, they did produce gold and offered jobs and investment opportunities, however fleeting.

The Franklin Mine had reopened by 1868, with the earnings from the gold mine augmented by a sawmill operation. But by 1877, the operation had slowed dramatically, and the mineshafts became badly flooded and caved-in. The Franklin mine had a reprieve in the early 20th century, when the rising price of gold made some marginal operations viable again. New equipment was brought in to work the caved-in shafts, and from 1901 until 1914, new veins were found and ore processed. But again, it proved economically unfeasible. The mine again lay dormant until 1933, when operations resumed for three more years - relying on the ore from two good veins and a Depression-era workforce willing to perform the dangerous work for as little as 40 cents an hour.

In 1869, it was reported that the geology of the area around the Wyckoff Mine could support a mining operation, and that the extensive timber holdings could also be exploited. Work started at the Wyckoff mine again, using six revolving iron stamps, a 60-horsepower engine, a complex ore crushing apparatus and an amalgamator. Two relatively rich veins of ore were found, but again profit was marginal, and the mine changed hands several times before being closed for good in 1906.

Even into the late 20th century, from time-to-time there have been discussions of reopening some of Fauquier's gold mines – most of which are surrounded by undeveloped land and virtually unchanged since they were closed. But such an enterprise would be even riskier today than it was in the past.

Evidence of the former southern Fauquier gold mine sites still pockmark the landscape in the Sumerduck, Morrisville, and Goldvein areas. Most of these former “digs” are now located on private land and are therefore off limits to visitors. Modern-day prospectors still find gold in the tributaries leading into the Rappahannock River and in the river itself. This activity has become a very popular avocation in southeastern Fauquier.

In order to celebrate and commemorate this important chapter of our history, the Gold Mining Camp Museum, the Commonwealth of Virginia's official Gold Mining Interpretive Center, was established at Monroe Park in the village of Goldvein, not far from the sites of the old gold mines.



Gulleys left from strip or lode mining at the Franklin Mine.



Entrance of 300 foot mine shaft at Franklin Mine from in the 1990's



Remnants of the dynamite shed used at the Franklin