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**#9** 1970-ANNEXATION (*SUMMER 05*)

**#8** 1912-WHEN GUN COTTON WAS KING (*FALL 05*)

**#7** 1864-BERMUDA HUNDRED CAMPAIGN (*JAN/FEB 06*)

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**#5** 1782-NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION IN CHESTERFIELD (*SEPT/OCT 06*)

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**#3** 1730s MID-LOTHIAN MINES – FIRST COMMERCIALY MINED COAL IN AMERICA  
By Martha W. McCartney

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**C**ommercial coal mining, which was under way in Chesterfield County by 1730, comprised not only the county's first true industrial development but also the first such operations undertaken in North America. Coal was discovered in Chesterfield during the early 1700s near Manakin Town, a French Huguenot settlement. Later, several French Huguenot families, such as the Trabues, Salles, Ammonettes and DuVals, operated coal pits near Falling Creek and the James River. Thomas Jefferson, in his "Notes on Virginia," stated that the quality of Chesterfield's coal was excellent. Eventually, mine workers settled in the vicinity of Midlothian, responding to the opportunity for employment in Chesterfield County's coal pits. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, a number of private coal pits were operating on a commercial scale. Miners immigrated to Chesterfield from Wales, England, and Scotland, and the Heths, who were English investors, opened coal pits in the county. The Wooldridge family was among the first to undertake coal mining in the Midlothian area.

During the Revolutionary War, Chesterfield County's coal pits supplied the cannon factory at Westham (near Richmond) with fuel that was used in making shot and shells for the Continental Army. In 1781, British General Phillips and his men entered Chesterfield County, marched to the courthouse, which they set ablaze, and then continued on to destroy the county's coal pits. This act attests to the importance of Chesterfield's coal-mining industry in the war for American independence. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the largest concentration of mines in the Richmond Coal Basin (a geological formation that extends across several counties to the west of the James River's fall line) was in the

Midlothian area. The largest coal mines in the Midlothian area during the late 18th century were the Black Heath pits, which were opened in 1788.

Coal mining quickly emerged as Chesterfield's most important industry, enabling the county's citizens to lobby successfully for publicly supported transportation systems. In 1802, Chesterfield's coal manufacturers and residents petitioned the General Assembly for permission to construct a turnpike between Manchester and Falling Creek, using part of the old Buckingham Road. The thoroughfare was opened to travelers in 1804 and was the first lengthy road in Virginia to have a graveled surface.

Chesterfield County's first railroad, which began operating in 1831, was the second commercial railroad to be built in the United States. It was a 13-mile-long mule-and-gravity-powered line that connected the Midlothian coal mines with wharves that were located at Manchester. The Chesterfield Railroad was supplanted by the Richmond and Danville Railroad, which reached Midlothian in 1850. The Richmond and Petersburg Railroad, chartered in 1836, the Winterpock railroad, chartered in 1840, and other rail lines were built to several coal pits. The Richmond and Danville Railroad, chartered in 1848, was in operation by 1849. Its tracks cut across the northwestern part of the county, passing through Coalfield (Midlothian).

During the second quarter of the 19th century, Chesterfield County's coal mines reached the pinnacle of their importance, thanks to modernized production techniques. By 1825, the Black Heath, Railey, Stone Henge, Cunliffe, Wooldridge, Maiden Head and Union mines were producing a million bushels of coal annually. Industrial

development in the northern United States provided markets for Chesterfield coal, as did local factories such as the Bellona Foundry, established in 1810. There were seven or eight major mines in the Midlothian area by 1835, where production reached an estimated 75,000 tons of coal annually. The most important of these enterprises was the Mid-Lothian Coal Mining Co. These mining facilities employed a large number of men, both black and white, whose pay infused a sizeable sum of money into the local economy. Some mines,



**Grove Shaft mine ruins**

such as the Creek Co.'s Green Hole pits, were worked by company-owned slaves, although most mines depended on a combination of hired slaves, whites and free blacks. The coal-mining industry prospered during the 1840s and 50s, and it was during these decades that Midlothian grew into one of the largest settlements in Chesterfield County. Henry Howe, who visited the Midlothian mines in the summer of 1843, described not only their productiveness, but also the strangeness of the underground labyrinths in which the miners worked.

During the mid-1850s, the mines in the Midlothian area were rocked with a series of explosions that claimed many lives and caused earth tremors in a several-mile radius. Such incidents caused an exodus of workers from the Midlothian mines and alarmed the local population.

On the eve of the Civil War, the village of Midlothian had a large company-owned store, three or more privately owned stores, a hospital for miners, and, most likely, one or more taverns and other commercial facilities. Company-owned housing provided shelter for coal miners and their families. A Methodist church, popularly known as the Old English Church, was located to the east of Midlothian during the 1840s and a Masonic Lodge was built in the village during the 1850s. During the 1850s, Midlothian became a regular stop on the Richmond and Danville Railroad line.

When war broke out between the North and South in 1861, Chesterfield County's coal industry was stimulated, for the fossil fuel was sorely needed by the Confederacy's defense industry, especially in the Tredegar Iron Works, which produced heavy ordnance. Although the Union Army marched up the Buckingham Road and through Midlothian in May 1864, intending to destroy the county's railroads and prevent reinforcements from reaching the embattled Confederates at Drewry's Bluff, no combat is known to have occurred in the immediate vicinity of the Mid-Lothian Coal Mining

Co.'s property. After the fall of Richmond, 100 troops of the 9th Vermont Infantry were detailed to guard the Midlothian mines and camped in the vicinity of the Railey Hill pits for about a month.

After the Civil War, coal production in Chesterfield fell sharply, and the Midlothian coal mines never regained their earlier success. In 1882, when an explosion at Grove Shaft led to the loss of 32 lives (a tragedy that was followed by an embezzlement scandal involving the company's superintendent), the last large-scale mining operation in Midlothian was shut down. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, efforts were made to revive Chesterfield's mining industry, but they never attained success. During the 1880s, the population of Midlothian declined significantly. In 1923, when Midlothian's mining industry folded completely and its lumber mills closed, many residents of Midlothian moved away, especially blacks. Suburban growth came to the area after World War II, resulting in a proliferation of new construction. ■

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