

Fort Savannah Village and Museum

1963-1966

The Old Red Mill stockholders were dismayed when the mill building and the country store burned to the ground, but they were not deterred from pursuing their vision of making tourism an important part of Lewisburg's identity. Dr. John Montgomery, an avid historian, was the president of the stockholders board and spearheaded the drive to fully engage the community in the development project. This became a community project with over one hundred individuals and businesses purchasing \$100 shares of stock. Volunteers formed several 50-person work parties to gather chestnut poles from Cross Mountain for building the stockade fence, dismantling several log homes from around the county, and hauling them back to Lewisburg. The logs were used to construct the log visitor center that is the centerpiece of today's Montwell Commons.

Dr. Montgomery maintained extensive minutes of the stockholder meetings that record the project as it progressed. A number of articles were published in local and regional newspapers that also featured the project, and those sources are presented in this report.



Sketch by Twinkle Montgomery in the Greenbrier Historical Society archive vertical file #8

March 21, 1963

GROUP PLANS HISTORICAL RESTORATION (excerpts):

The erection of a replica of life in colonial America in the 18th century took a turn towards reality last week. Meeting in the office of the C&P Telephone Co., Court St, Lewisburg, Wednesday, March 13, were incorporators of the Old Red Mill Restoration committee.

At this session, it was suggested that the name of the restoration be "Fort Savannah Village". Construction is contemplated to get underway this spring with opening of at least the initial structure some time this summer. Site of the construction is on the Old Red Mill property at the northern approach to Lewisburg on US Rt. 219. The plot of land measures 243 feet of frontage on the highway and 171 feet in depth.

FIRST BUILDING Scheduled for construction first is a tourist information center and museum on the original foundation of the Old Red Mill. As seen in the illustration, the building in the center foreground will be divided into two sections above ground. In the basement will be a fireproof museum to house priceless relics of previous centuries.

Added later will be several log houses. These will be authentic structures existing in the area which were built in the 18th or 19th centuries. They will be purchased and transported to the site.

Restoration work will begin to convert the cabins into buildings to house 6 or 7 contemplated projects. Included are : West Virginia handmade glass shop, a hand-weaving shop; a blacksmith shop; a one-room school; a general handicraft shop; a furniture-making shop, and similar buildings.

FOR TOURISTS Primarily, the project will be designed to attract tourists to the area.

"We hope to capture a little of the spirit of Williamsburg (Virginia)," enthusiastically exclaimed Fred Staunton, a member of the group. Mr. Staunton went on to explain that the restoration will be done with local money and local efforts.

Thus far shares of stock have been sold at \$100 each, giving the organization \$10,900 in working capital. There is an additional authorization of \$11,500 in stock which has not yet been issued.

Attending the meeting were Dr. John Montgomery (chairman), Ralph Barr, Mrs. C.W. Lewis, Sr., Mrs Sid Neathawk, Clyde Goodman, Earl Sampson, Andrew W. McLaughlin, Woodrow Taylor, and Mr. Staunton.

Tuesday, April 2, is the next scheduled meeting date. The group will assemble at 7:30 PM in the C&P office.

WSS Star First year no. 39

April 2, 1963 Old Red Mill, Inc. stockholder meeting

After considerable discussion of the rebuilding of the property of Old Red Mill, Inc the following motion, made by Mr. Ralph Barr and seconded by Mrs. Randolph K. Houk, was passed with one dissenting vote.

"That the Old Red Mill, Inc. authorize construction, on the property of the Old Red Mill, Inc, along the lines of the drawing resented and tentatively referred to as "Fort Savannah Village", first construction to incorporate the existing foundation of former mill with a log structure or structures situated on top of same on concrete slab which will serve as roof and/or ceiling for basement area; and that authorization for the expenditure of ten thousand five hundred dollars on same be given at this time with the understanding that further authorization be secured from the Board of Directors if the cost should exceed this amount."

April 2, 1963 Report to Stockholders (as summarized at September 1964 meeting)

After much discussion and considerable planning It was decided on April 2, 1963 to utilize the existing stone foundation as a museum area, to cap same with pre-stressed concrete, and upon this place one or more log structures. As plans were further considered it seemed desirable to use a single log structure to cover the entire foundation and museum area. It was also decided that the entire lot, except for a section in front, should be enclosed with a stockade fence.

In carrying out the authorization of the Board of Directors the president wishes to acknowledge the devoted and able assistance of many people. He does so at the risk of omitting many who should be included. First of all, he wishes to acknowledge the devotion and service of the members of the Board of Directors. If liberty can be taken to single out a few of these, mention should be made of the constant assistance of Mrs. Randolph K. Hock in planning and supervising the construction and the acquisition and arrangement of the country store and museum items. We are indebted to Fred Stanton for the acquisition of most of the logs for the rebuilding and for an enthusiasm that would not let the project die. Likewise we owe Andrew W. McLaughlin a vote of thanks for his vision and efforts, especially in the initial period when his experience and enthusiasm were so much needed. The free, constant, and devoted service of Ralph Parr, our treasurer, deserves special recognition.

If time permitted I should like to list the names of the 50 or more persons who went as volunteers to Cross Mountain to cut and transport the chestnut timber used in constructing our stockade fence, and those who donated their trucks. This timber was donated by the Gauley Land and Coal Company. I should like to list a like number of persons who helped dismantle the log buildings and transport them to our building site and others who hauled donated stone from the Acme Limestone Company. To this list we could add the names of painters, carpenters, and others who helped in many phases of the construction. I should especially like to

acknowledge the gift of log buildings by Mrs. Andrew Gwinn, and Mr. James E. Gwinn of Lowell, West Virginia, of Mr. & Mrs. J. B. Young of Bungers Mill, Mrs. Lindall Hinkle of Williamsburg, and Mr. & Mrs. Alex S. Turner of Lewisburg.

April 2, 1963

Building permit application submitted to construct a 40'x90' museum building on the Old Red Mill site for \$30,000. Construction to begin on 4/15/1963 and be complete by 6/1/1963.

April 11, 1963

OLD RED MILL TO REBUILD At a meeting of the Old Red Mill, Inc, on April 2, the board of directors voted to proceed with a rebuilding project on the site of the Old Red Mill which was destroyed by fire on November 8, 1961. The plan for the rebuilding calls for the construction of a colonial village. It has been tentatively referred to as "Fort Savannah Village." This would seem to be an appropriate name in view of the fact that Fort Savannah stood very near the site.

Following the decision to rebuild, a delegation of the board of directors went before the Town council and received approval for the project. It is anticipated that the initial construction will begin at once and that the first unit will be complete by early summer. The first unit will include a fireproof museum in the basement area of the Old Red Mill site and a large one story log structure on top of same. This unit will serve as the headquarters and information center.

In time a number of log buildings will be constructed around the perimeter of the one acre lot and the entire area will be enclosed with an appropriate fence or stockade.

The board of directors authorized the sale of additional stock in amount of \$11,000. This stock is being offered in denominations of \$100 each. Individuals who desires to become a part of this worthy project can purchase stock certificates by contacting any member of the board of directors. They are as follows: Ralph Barr, Clyde Goodwin, Dale Harvey, S.E. Haynes, Mrs Randolph K. Hock, Mrs. Marvin Houck, Dr. George Ferrell, Mrs. C.W. Lewis, Sr., Andrew W. McLaughlin, Dr. John F. Montgomery, Mrs. Sidney Neathawk, Herbert H. Rothwell, Fred Staunton, Woodrow Taylor, and Alex S. Turner.

Greenbrier Independent vol 97 no. 47

July 11, 1963

OLD FORT SAVANNAH Work is progressing on the construction work at the Old Fort Savannah Village to be erected on the Old Red Mill lot in Lewisburg.

The foundation and basement of the Old Red Mill have been worked over and a reinforced concrete slab top put on. The top of the basement will have two inches of concrete poured over it and on this will be erected two old log buildings which are to house antique exhibits and crafts. In this basement, which will be fireproof, will be exhibited the art works of Mrs. Doris Caldwell, valuable antiques, and articles pertaining to early history.

A stockade fence will be erected around the entire lot. A volunteer work crew went to Cross Mountain near Clintonville last Saturday and cut old chestnut logs to be used in the building of this fence. The timber has been given to the enterprise by the Gauley Coal Land Company of Rupert. Again this Saturday another volunteer work crew will assemble in Lewisburg at 7 AM and go to Cross Mountain and cut more logs. A picnic lunch will be served on the grounds. The fence, when completed, will surround the 250 by 108 foot lot.

A semi-circle of small log cabins will be built inside the of the stockade fence. These cabins will be used to house any different crafts and arts of the pioneer days, such as a blacksmith shop, a harness shop, weaving and spinning, and other almost forgotten arts excelled by our forefathers.

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Derrick Barr of Lewisburg shows his sister, Ruth, the stockade erected as part of the rebuilding of Fort Savannah in Lewisburg. He explains that the points on the logs were sharpened to keep attackers from climbing into the fort area. Rebuilding of the fort is being done by volunteers. When completed, the stockade will enclose one acre on which will be a central building to be used as an information center and country store. Several small dwellings will house relics of pioneer days.

Photograph and caption from the Greenbrier Historical Society Reading Room "Business Series 1, container 7, Businesses: N+O"

August 1, 1963

VOLUNTEER HELP NEEDED The builders of Savannah Village on the site of the Old Red Mill in Lewisburg are asking for volunteer help to build the village. Anyone interested in assisting with this community project can contact John Montgomery.

Saturday volunteers will go to Lowell in Summers county and dismantle two double story log houses, which will then be transported to Lewisburg and assembled as a part of Savannah Village. All this work will be done by volunteers. Several old log buildings have been donated to the project. The oldest smoke house in this section of the state, near White Sulphur Springs, has been donated as one of several buildings that will form this tourist attraction.

The stone for the parking area has been donated and is now being used.

The concrete slab over the old mill basement has been poured and is ready for use. This slab will serve as the roof for the fireproof museum as well as the foundation for two log buildings.

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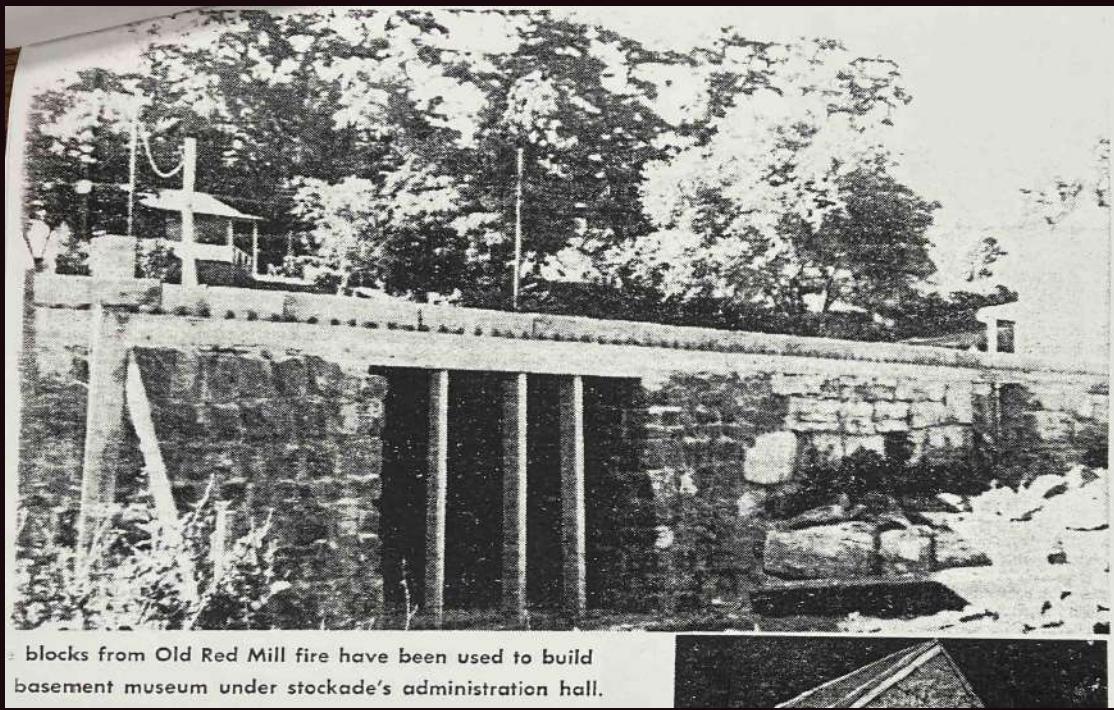


Photo published in the *Greenbrier Independent* July 27, 1963

August 7, 1963

Dr. John Montgomery receives a cover letter with the prints of the roof trusses from Howard L. Everhart, A.I.A, Charleston, WV

May 14, 1964

Dr. John F. Montgomery, president of Old Red Mill, Inc., reports that the Fort Savannah Village project is nearing completion of its first stage and will be open to the public the latter part of the month.

The main building which will house a most interesting museum and country store has been completed. Within the next two weeks, items which have been secured for the museum will be arranged for display. They include many early American farm and household items as well as the exquisite miniature nativity figures created by Mrs. John North Caldwell.

The museum-country store building is itself an artistic creation which has risen on the substantial stone foundation of the Old Red Mill. In fact, this stone portion is more than a foundation. It actually forms the first floor of the building, and virtually makes this, the museum area, fireproof since its ceiling is formed of re-stressed concrete beams. An old-fashioned bedroom, largely furnished by Marguerite Donnally, and a huge brick fireplace flanked with many early American kitchen items bring touches of warmth and charm.

The second story of the building is made of logs which came from old houses of the area, most of which date back to the late 1700's and early 1800's. Two large log houses were secured from the Gwinn farms of Lowell, Summers county. One of these served as a fort for citizens of that locality during the days that Indians frequented the region. A small log building, which once served as a store, came from Bungers Mill. A somewhat larger building, the Dave Williams house, came from the Williamsburg area on the road between Pembroke and Trout. Alex Turner furnished some logs which he had secured from an old house in Lewisburg. Almost all of these buildings were donated, dismantled, and transported by citizens interested in promoting this civic gesture.

The completed building with its large stone chimney, attractive front porch, and pleasing lines gives every evidence of having stood on the present site for more than a century. Its setting is also greatly enhanced by the stockade fence which surrounds the one acre plot. The fence was constructed of chestnut timber donated by the Gauley Land and Coal Company. It was cut and transported from Cross Mountain by volunteer labor and donated trucks.

The formal opening of the Fort Savannah Village Museum and Country Store has been set for May 27 at 8 PM. For the admission fee of \$1 one will be entitled to all the cake and ice cream topped with fresh strawberries, he can eat. Of course, he will also have the opportunity to view the museum displays, the country store, and the fine workmanship and artistry which have made this building a thing of beauty and charm. As many as can and will, are invited to come in costumes of the colonial times. *Greenbrier Independent* vol 98 no. 49



Exterior photo of Fort Savannah in Lewisburg, which was opened as a museum last May. Photographer was standing with back to historic spring.

Photo published in "A Plain Tale", Charleston *Sunday Gazette-Mail* September 13, 1964

May 27, 1964

FORT SAVANNAH Fort Savannah had its official opening on May 27. To date it has had more than 800 visiting guests. These guests have come from 24 states. Their enthusiasm and complimentary remarks have been most encouraging. They have been especially complimentary of the unusually fine display of art work by Mrs. John North Caldwell. This collection is splendidly displayed. It consists not only of scenes done in miniature figures but also of the life size nativity figures which are now owned by Old Stone Church. These nativity figures were also created by Mrs. Caldwell.

But interest has not been confined to the art display. The country store, the colonial bedroom and the large museum room have likewise evoked expressions of praise and genuine pleasure. Much interest has also been expressed in the 42 foot hewn beam which served for many years as a support for the long porch on the front of the Old Lewisburg Hotel.

One of the objectives of Fort Savannah is to 'encourage the production of authentic handcraft articles. Already a number of West Virginia handmade products are on sale. More will be added as appropriate articles become available. Fort Savannah has been open from 1 - 5 Monday through Friday and from 7 - 9 on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Beginning with Sunday, August 16, it will also be open each Sunday afternoon from 2 to 5.

Fort Savannah is operated by a group of civic minded citizens of Lewisburg and the surrounding areas. At the moment there are 85 stockholders who have purchased \$24,600 worth of the incorporated authorization of \$30,000. This leaves a balance of \$5,400 worth of stock yet available for purchase. The price of one share is \$100. You may make known your desire to purchase one or more shares by contacting Dr. John F. Montgomery, Mrs. Randolph K. Hock, Andrew McLaughlin, or Ralph Barr, officers of the corporation. *The West Virginia News*, Ronceverte (Reported on September 10, 1964)



View of main room and fireplace in Fort Savannah.



Basement of Fort Savannah museum in Lewisburg.



Early American interior in basement of Fort Savannah.



Detail of museum in main room next to fireplace.



Two of Mrs. Doris Caldwell's dioramas in basement museum. Photo on left is scene in country store. At right is Christmas scene.



Photos published in "A Plain Tale", Charleston *Sunday Gazette-Mail* September 13, 1964

June 13, 14 1964

Fort Savannah Village and Museum is included in the 1964 House and Garden Tour conducted by the Four Federated Garden Clubs of Lewisburg for the benefit of the Fort Savannah Village and Museum. *House and Garden Tour brochure*, Four Federated Garden Clubs

July 21, 1964

PLAIN TALE FROM THE HILLS: WEST VIRGINIA'S CRADLE REBUILT AT LEWISBURG by William C. Blizzard

A "Savannah", according to my dictionary, is a flat, nearly treeless plain. In West Virginia, the Mountain State, you don't expect to find flat plains, treeless or otherwise. Yet one of the earliest settlements in West Virginia, on the present site of Lewisburg, was named *Fort Savannah*. Andrew Lewis erected the fort in 1755 on orders from British General Edward Braddock, who was killed in the same year by French and Indians near what is now Pittsburgh. The name of the Greenbrier stockade, however, was not altogether inappropriate. The plateau around Lewisburg is still called the Big Levels, and like most true savannas, is well-known for fertile grasslands supporting large numbers of fine cattle.

At the time Fort Savannah was carved from forest, few settlers lived in the area. This few either lost their scalps during the French and Indian Wars or left for safer territory. But English and Scots started moving in from Eastern Virginia in 1769, so that General Lewis was able to muster 1000 soldiers from the area to help fight the battle of Point Pleasant.

By that time, the name of Fort Savannah has been changed to Fort Union, possibly because some schoolmarm had brought a dictionary into the area. But the fortified village was still in the same spot, at the junction of the Seneca and Kanawha Trails. In 17798, Fort Union became the seat of Greenbrier County and incorporated as Lewisburg in 1782, yet has that honor.

A couple of years ago, a group of Lewisburg area citizens, headed by Dr. John Montgomery, president of Greenbrier College, and Mrs Randolph Hock, owner of the General Lewis Hotel, decided to reconstruct ancient Fort Savannah on its original site.

Built along lines suggested by old sketches, the village fort was erected and opened to visitors on May 27 of this year. Fortunately for the builders, log structures are yet fairly common in the area and seven such houses were dismantled and the squared logs utilized to reconstruct the fort. Inside dimensions of the building are about 98 by 48 feet.

Vertical chestnut logs, looking like giant sharpened pencils stood on their blunt ends, forming a stockade. Eventually a half-dozen log homes and shops will be built around the fort, as they were more than 200 years ago.

At present, the Fort Savannah Museum country store is filled with miscellaneous pioneer tools, household furnishings, and bric-a-brac donated by local citizens. The "County Store" part of the name is justified by just such a 19th century installation at one end of the fort, complete with authentic cracker barrel stock and furnishings.

One of the buildings to be constructed around the fort, incidentally, will house the village blacksmith, complete with forge, but presumably without the spreading chestnut tree.

Other buildings will contain displays featuring spinning, weaving, and other native crafts essential to life before the day of mail order catalog and the department store.

The reconstructed fort is built on two levels, and an outstanding basement exhibit is the work of Mrs. Doris Caldwell, a Lewisburg artist. Most of Mrs. Caldwell scenes are diorama, miniatures in three dimensions depicting Victorian life. One of them furthers the "Country store" motif by depicting such an interior, with its owner, customers, clerks, loafers, and a Negro custodian.

Where is the money coming from to reconstruct Fort Savannah? Local people have furnished much of it, as well as the labor and historical items. Tourist admission, at 75 cents each, have helped a little.

It is slow work, and hard work for those who have shouldered most of the burden. If more funds are available, perhaps another aspect of Fort Savannah reconstruction might be considered: the rebuilding and cleaning up of Lewis's Spring.

For Fort Savannah was built where it was (just off Main Street in Lewisburg), not only because two pioneer trails intersected there, but also because of the presence of a spring finishing a copious supply of pure water (a large sign proclaims the fact), and appears at presents to be used by someone as a haven for minnows and other aquatic fish bait. It seems a shabby fate to befall the physical feature which, more than any other, decided the location of the proud old town of Lewisburg. It has the effect of turning a plain tale from the hills into a rather dirty story.

September 9, 1964 *Old Red Mill Stockholders Annual Meeting minutes (excerpt)*

Following this (financial) report a period of discussion followed. It was agreed that Fort Savannah should remain open during the month of October. Some concern was expressed about the amount, 75¢, charged for admission to the museum. This was left in the hands of the Board of Directors for their further consideration.

May 4, 1966

LETTER TO STOCKHOLDERS: "Briefly, Mrs. Detch and I have been fully informed on the matter of the purpose and spirit of the corporation and if the stock is sold to us, we will assure all stockholders that (1) insofar as it may be possible from a business point of view to do so, we will continue the operation of the facilities and display the exhibits in the spirit and purpose of the corporation; (2) pay stockholders the sum of \$100.00 per share for the capital stock held by the stockholders; (3) assume the payment of the indebtedness of the corporation which we are informed does not exceed \$5,300.00"

May 20, 1966

BOARD MEETING (excerpts) "The first matter of business was to determine how many stockholders had indicated their willingness to sell their stock to Mr. John L. Detch at \$100.00 per share in accordance with his written offer made by letter dated May 4, 1966. The canvass revealed that the owners of 226 shares of the 265 issued and outstanding, had expressed their willingness to sell their stock. It was the feeling of the Board of Directors that the few remaining stockholders would be willing to follow the decision of those who had already signified their willingness to sell.

Considering the overwhelming affirmative response to the stockholders to accept Mr. John L. Detch's offer to purchase their stock at \$100.00 per share it was agreed to expedite the matter in the following matter:"

July 28, 1966 (ORM meeting minutes)

"... the present Board of Directors of the Old Red Mill, Inc. do hereby as a body and individually resign and do thereby divest themselves of any and all responsibility and obligation for said corporation . . ."

With the sale of the stock, over the next few years John and Rosalie Detch realized that a business built around a museum with a 75 cent admission could not be successful. They added a restaurant to the original rectangular visitor center and built two motel buildings, thus transforming the Fort Savannah Village into the Fort Savannah Inn.

Sources

The *Greenbrier Independent* newspaper clippings were copied from the newspaper digital archives at the Greenbrier Historical Society. Other newspaper articles, photographs, and reports were copied from the Greenbrier Historical Society Reading Room "Business Series 1, container 7, Businesses: N+O".