

THE WHARTONS

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Like so many towns and cities, Radford, Virginia, grew with the aid of a group of community “founders.” The town took its name from Dr. John B. Radford, one of the area’s most prominent settlers. Dr. Radford’s son-in-law, Gabriel Wharton, utilizing land inherited from Radford, may actually deserve even more credit for promoting not only the city of Radford but also a sister community just across the New River and regional interest in economic development.

Anne Rebecca Radford, known as Nannie, married Gabriel C. Wharton in 1863. She was twenty-one; he about thirty-six, came from Culpepper, Virginia, and was colonel in the Confederate infantry. That same year, Wharton received his promotion to general and the Radford family often referred to this man with a bushy beard by his rank rather than by his name. Nannie accompanied him while Wharton saw service in Tazewell County but came home when the general moved up into West Virginia. Their only child, William, may well have been conceived “in camp” as it were.

The first land transaction recorded in Wharton’s name occurred in 1867. He paid \$4,000 for about four hundred acres near Yellow Sulphur Springs in Montgomery County. Title to about 550 acres in Lovely Mount passed from the Radfords to the Whartons in 1869, which means that Nannie and her husband lived in a house and on land owned by her father for some six years after their wedding. Apparently Glencoe, “The Wharton House,” had originally been a Radford house, perhaps a wedding present from Nannie’s father.

A visitor to Central Depot in 1867 noted only fourteen houses in the community, of which six were owned by the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. “Glencoe” and a nearby tenant house accounted for two of the other eight. The main house, with any number of outbuildings, was either rebuilt or renovated, perhaps after a fire, about 1870. It overlooked the New River at a point directly across from the Pulaski County “holler” created by Morgan’s Branch. Anyone looking northwest from Glencoe could see the railroad just below the house and then, across the river, much of the area’s early center of activity: the railroad bridge – burned and then rebuilt during the Civil War, the depot in the “New River Depot,” a three story hotel run by the Dunlap brothers but owned by the Radford family, and other structures on what, as of 1870, may well have appeared the more developed side of the New.

The Whartons’ nearest white and/or landowning neighbor to the west was Radford Jones, who had married an Ingles widow. Between Ingleside and Glencoe three black families – Granville Lewis, Maria Mitchell, and Hampton McDaniel – rented or received free housing for ser-

vices rendered. To the east, William Lewis (black) and John Wade (mulatto) also apparently rented from the Whartons.

As of 1870 the Wharton household included Gabriel, now a “civil engineer,” Nannie, William, age six, two black Bowles children listed as house servants, and a five member black Prillam family, the two males of which worked on the farm.

Wharton listed his real estate property at \$36,000 and his personal property at \$5,210. If accurate, this made him the third wealthiest man in the immediate area, following his father-in-law John Blair Radford (\$121,000/\$10,000), and Edward Hammet (\$50,000/\$7,000). These men, perhaps spearheaded by the younger Wharton, took a few years to regroup after the war and then began to rebuild and expand their economic activities. Some of Wharton’s investments may have been financed by his father-in-law. When John Blair Radford died in 1872, his estate included two notes owed him by “the general” totaling some \$5,000 – no small sum in that day.

When he was in West Virginia during the war, Wharton had taken note of the mineral richness of his surroundings, especially the quantities of coal. When the war ended, he decided to exploit these resources, tying their development into that of the New River Valley and Southwest Virginia in general. Elected to the Virginia legislature in 1871, Wharton secured a charter for the New River Railroad, Mining and Manufacturing Company the following year. He served as a company director as the enterprise made plans to build a railroad through Hinton, West Virginia. The next ten years must have been very busy and very exciting, but problems developed – at least in terms of his personal involvement. By 1881, the corporation’s mining interests had been taken over by “northern capitalists” and the railroad rights had been sold to Norfolk and Western. In other words, the development originally envisioned by Wharton did in fact take place, but now without his active participation. Nevertheless, Wharton remained recognized as Radford’s industrial leader, and perhaps he played a role in attracting some of Radford’s earliest industries.

In addition, by the 1880s Gabriel Wharton had become a *community* land developer. His first such efforts involved plans for a major railroad center at New River Depot, most of the land around which he had inherited from John Blair Radford.

As of 1880, Wharton listed his age as fifty-two and his occupation – consequent in large part to the Radford lands he inherited – as farmer. On the Pulaski side of the river, the family operated one large farm west of New River Depot and probably another one at Radford. The Montgomery County acreage was also farmed. Nannie was thirty – six and William, at fifteen, was a student. One of the Bowles children, now nineteen, still lived in the house as did four white boarders, who may actually have been more visitors than boarders.

The Jones/Ingles household was still Glencoe’s nearest landowning neighbor to the west and Arnheim, occupied by James L. Radford, the nearest to the east. Black Doleman and Mitchell

families flanked Glencoe on either side. Henry Mitchell appeared on Wharton account books for years.

With the Montgomery side of the river still a long way from developed it is not surprising that, when Wharton decided the area needed a newspaper, he located its offices in New River Depot. The New River Bulletin, owned by Gabriel Wharton and edited by C. W. Scott, operated for perhaps five years beginning in 1882. That the Whartons had expected New River Depot to be the up-and-coming center of future development is supported by the presence of an Episcopal church known as Mrs. Wharton's Chapel. William Wharton conducted Sunday School there for several years in the 1890s but the white congregation dwindled, absorbed by Grace across the river, and the chapel ceased to function as a white place of worship. New River Depot legend relates that a Mrs. Wharton, probably William's wife, regularly arrived on Sunday morning to open the doors when the chapel was used by a black congregation and choir in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, the structure burned in 1909. Also as evidence of Wharton's early expectations for New River Depot, the area's first Masonic lodge - the "Wharton Chapter," - was founded in New River in 1872 and operated until 1885.

The family continued to live in Glencoe, on the other side of the river, and most probably relied on a ferry and/or on the railroad bridge to get them back and forth. At least one wedding took place in the elegant, high ceiling parlor at Glencoe. In 1888 Mary Charlotte Burnette, a black servant, married George Walker. Nannie arranged for the ceremony at Glencoe. George and his family lived near Morgan's Cut, some two miles away. Had trees and hills not been in the way, Charlotte could have seen her future home from an upstairs window if she sighted along the tracks across the river as they headed toward Dublin.

"Nannie" Wharton died in 1890. Susan Heth, who married William Radford Wharton that same year, took over the running of Glencoe. Her husband, trained as an attorney, opened a law practice on both sides of the river. He had been given Gabriel's power of attorney in 1889 and became the family realtor and business manager.

There were a number of businesses to manage. Most prosaically, General Gabriel Wharton ran a general store in New River Depot into the late 1880s. Additionally, he had a grist mill and a lumber mill in New River Depot, operating off water power generated by the creek and enhanced by a mill race and water reservoir. They sold their interest in the Fremont House hotel.

And there were the farms. The Wharton's ran very large accounts with stores on both sides of the river. Their account with Joseph Chumbley in New River Depot totaled over \$500 in 1890, the bill apparently being settled once a year in cash. In their account with a Radford store, debits were frequently balanced by credits not of cash but of grains and other commodities. The day-to-day operations of the New River Depot farm may well have been handled by hired labor—often black—with Sue Wharton making only periodic trips to provide general supervision.

General Wharton started selling land in New River Depot in the 1870s, in the beginning without much indication that any “plan” existed. Someone, probably William, later sectioned out residential subdivisions on the road leading toward Belspring and Giles County. Most of the sales nearest the road were made to whites. C.W. Scott became a sub-land speculator in his own right. Areas to the east up what is called Fort Hill and to the west up King and Midkiff Hills were divided into half acre lots and actively sold to blacks, especially railroad employees.

In 1890 Gabriel sold 110 acres in the heart of New River Depot to the New River Land and Development Company but soon bought the property back. It is very likely that Gabriel Wharton *was* the New River Land and Development Company but then decided to retain ownership of the land in his own name. In 1891 Gabriel sold a very long but equally narrow strip of land to the Norfolk and Western Railway, apparently extending the line’s right of way and providing it with stockyards and loading areas. As of 1893, William Radford Wharton advertised himself as a real estate agent in New River Depot. Much of the land he sold was his own family’s property.

The family sold most—some 580 acres—of its Montgomery County holdings to the Radford Land & Improvement Company in 1887 for \$50,000. A blueprint for the company’s Plan “B” shows the five acre Wharton reserve situated almost cheek to jowl next to a factory—perhaps the early pipe shop. That same year, James Radford sold much of his Montgomery County holdings to the same company for \$67,500. These two sales comprised most of the land that is today West Radford.

William Radford Wharton’s name is on many, many of the real estate transactions in Radford in the 1890s. He was also one of the first of the newly incorporated City of Radford’s City Council members, representing the West Ward.

About the time Radford was being incorporated, Gabriel Wharton had been in the process of building a hotel in the city. The structure was bought by the city and became Radford’s first courthouse. By then, however, General Wharton was in his 70s and his place as one of the town’s most prominent citizens was being eclipsed by ex-governor John Hoge Tyler’s arrival.

As noted, William Radford Wharton married Susan Heth, whose family lived in what would become East Radford. While his father organized the “E.M. Wharton Camp” of Confederate veterans in 1893, his wife served as president of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, organized in Radford in 1896. William served as a captain in the brief 1898 US engagement against Spain. Like most volunteers for that conflict, he never actually got to Cuba.

When the census taker went by Glencoe in 1900, Gabriel, seventy-five and a farmer, lived with his daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. William Jr. had not yet been born and William Sr. must have been out of town that day. Also in residence at Glencoe were Flora Davis, a twenty year old black cook, and Blanche Adams, a forty-four year old white teacher perhaps related to

the Adams who had married Elizabeth Radford. Andrew Attison, forty-five and black, lived to the east of Glencoe. One of his children was named Gabrella.

When Gabriel C. Wharton died in his early 80s, he had lived to see Lovely Mount become the thriving city of Radford. He had also lived to see New River Depot prosper but then begin to stagnate, eclipsed—through fate and perhaps Gabriel’s own activities—by events on the other side of the river. William Radford Wharton died in 1918, at about fifty-five years of age. Sue Heth Wharton survived him by forty years! Whartons continued to live in Glencoe for some time, but their role in the development of New River, or Radford, and of Southwest Virginia had long since seen its heyday.

In the 1930s Mary Charlotte Burnett Walker’s daughter Gertrude spent a summer as a teenager working at Glencoe. She remembers being paid \$17 for that entire time and being very unhappy with her meager reward. Today, visitors to Radford drive by the house, till impressive as it sits alone and now empty atop a knoll behind Inland’s parking lot. Unlike Gertrude Walker Stigger, who has very clear memories of life at Glencoe, the visitors can only wonder at what might have transpired within its walls and few know how its residents helped build the city through which they are passing.

Addendum: Glencoe is no longer a lonely house sitting “atop a knoll behind Inland’s parking lot”. It was restored in the 1990s and houses now Glencoe Museum. Many of the other structures mentioned in this article are still around, so come and visit us!

Sources

Information about the Whartons was collected piecemeal from a variety of sources. Those readily available include: the national censuses, Pulaski and Montgomery County deed and court records, the Radford family letters (at the Radford Public Library), and Linda Killen, *The Whartons’ Town: New River Deopt, 1870-1940* (Radford University: College of Arts & Sciences Occasional Publications, 1993). Some Wharton family accounts are in the possession of Ken and Carolee Bondurant, of Radford, Virginia. Gertrude Walker Stigger, of New River Depot, also provided invaluable information.