



circa 1800

A SHORT HISTORY
OF THE
RUCKER FAMILY
AND THEIR
INVENTION OF THE
TOBACCO BATEAU
by
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THE RUCKER FAMILY

Two Rucker brothers invented the Tobacco Bateaux and to learn more about them it is important to study the family that produced such innovative men.

By showing some of the Rucker's early experiences and telling their history, we find out that they were creative, imaginative, quick think^{ing}, strong, hard working, and the type of frontiersmen that was needed to settle America.

Each generation settled new land and contributed to the welfare of their community.

Ruckers were represented in every war fought by America. In my family there were reportedly 16 Rucker men, all over six feet tall, who served in the Revolutionary War.

Yes, the Ruckers were large, strong men who contributed greatly to the history of our country.

The Ruckers sprang from solid stock first recorded in 1096 A.D. when Johan Von Rucher, Sir Knight Crusader, was granted a coat-of-arms in the first Crusade.

Being of German extraction, The Ruckers lived in Alsace-Lorraine, France, before immigrating to America in 1690 with the French Huguenots. The Huguenots, fleeing from persecution in France, embarked in an un^{sea}worthy vessel that was shipwrecked off the coast of Virginia.

Several versions of this most unusual arrival have passed down to different members of the family so that we may assume that it is true.

1. One story stated the ship sank near the mouth of the James River and Peter swam ashore living there awhile.
2. Another version said the ship was wrecked in the Jamestown Bay, and Peter floated for three days on a piece of driftwood before being rescued by a passing vessel.
3. The story that I like best is the one that related the ship went down twelve miles from Jamestown in a heavy storm and nearly all were lost. Peter tied two casks of rum together which buoyed him up (in more ways than one) for two days.

As might be inferred from these stories, Peter Rucker was a man of great strength, a man of determination with a great will to live. We will see these same traits in many of his descendants.

Peter Rucker lived in Essex County where he farmed 500 acres near Vauter's Church which he attended. He and his family eventually moved to Orange County where his grandson founded Ruckersville (now in Green County, Virginia). Peter has been credited with building a handsome corner cupboard, restored and given to the Virginia Museum by Eva Davidson. We know the cupboard was original to the house as it couldn't fit through the door and a window had to be removed.

Peter and his wife, Elizabeth, had ten children and each of these children had an average of ten children so that Peter Rucker had 100 grandchildren, 1,000/^{great-}grandchildren, and 10,000 gt.-great-grandchildren. Peter was the progenitor of a great family whose descendants today live all over the United States.

John Rucker, son of Peter, became active and very influential in Orange County, helping to found the Episcopal Church there. He was a captain in the Colonial Militia and active in politics. Recorded in the 1742 Journal of the House of Burgess of Virginia is the story of John Rucker and others being found guilty of "great misdemeanours."

John was accused of serving punch during an election to influence men to vote for his candidate. The sheriff said that he wouldn't permit entrance to anyone who had drunk Capt. Rucker's punch. He placed two guards inside which John promptly threw headlong out of the door. John seized the sheriff's drawn sword endeavoring to break it, which the sheriff prevented by drawing the sword through Rucker's hands. Friends came to Rucker's aid and a scuffle ensued causing the sheriff to close the polls for the rest of that day.

Six months later, John Rucker died a young man.

John and his wife, Susanna, had 12 children, seven of them boys. It had become Virginia tradition to provide each son with his own land. John patented 5,000 acres of virgin forest in Albermarle County (Deed Book 1, p.357) which later became Amherst County.

Five of John Rucker's sons moved to this land and carved out of the wilderness, tobacco plantations. Each of these men became successful in their farming endeavors and in turn prominent members of the community. The following personal sketches of John's five sons show their contribution to the settlement of the Piedmont district of Virginia.

1. John Rucker junior was the first of the family to move there. He lived at "White Hall" near Sweet Briar College, on land patented by John Sr. He was a dispatch bearer in the Revolutionary War and died in service. John married Eleanor Warren, whose family lived nearby, and had 9 children. As his father had done for him, John patented new lands in Bedford County for his sons.

2. Col. Ambrose Rucker was one of the more prominent family members. He founded the first Episcopal Church in the area noted on early records as "Rooker's Chapel," which evolved into Ascension Church now in Amherst Court House. Ambrose was a trustee in the founding of Warminister Academy and helped found the town of Madison, now Madison Heights, a small town on the riverbank opposite Lynchburg. He was a Justice of the Peace and a sheriff of Amherst County. Col. Rucker was on the committee to divide Amherst County from Albermarle County.

Ambrose and his brothers, John and Benjamin, signed petitions to establish a ferry across the Fluvanna River (at that time people didn't realize that it was the James River), and Ambrose and Benjamin signed petitions to establish a tobacco warehouse in Amherst County.

Ambrose Rucker's main claim to fame was his dramatic escape from Gen. Tarleton's troupes in Charlottesville. Col. Rucker was representing Amherst County at the House of Delegates Meeting when Jack Jouette rode in with news of Tarleton's advance. The Legislative body dispersed hastily. The invading British troops figured they had a sure thing in catching Col. Rucker as he was six feet six inches tall and weighted over 300 pounds. However Rucker's powerful hunter hefted him over hills, creeks, and snakerail fences quickly out distancing the redcoats. The British were in awe of this fine Rucker horse.

Thomas Jefferson was friends with the Rucker family and visited them in Amherst County. In fact Jefferson referred to the area as "Rucker's Mountains." When Ambrose Rucker was sueing a neighbor in a land dispute, he sought Jefferson's oppinion. Ambrose was later represented by Patrick Henry in that suit.

Col. Rucker was also good friends with Peter Fransciso of Revolutionary War fame. It was said that Ambrose was the only man who could beat Peter in friendly fist-a-cuffs. Peter was reknown for his super-human strength and one time threw a horse over a fence to get rid of a pesky sightseer.

Ambrose Rucker married twice and had 14 children. He lived to be over 80 years old.

3. Son Isaac Rucker raised tobacco, as did all the Rucker brothers, was a lawyer and was a Captain in the Revolutionary War. Isaac signed a number of county petitions: one to establish a tobacco warehouse in Amherst, opposite Lynchburg, "as the cost is too great to take the casks over the ferry and up the banks." The 1797 petition to divide the county was signed by five Ruckers named Isaac.

Isaac Rucker had seven children. One of his descendants founded Ruckersville, Kentucky.

4. Benjamin Rucker was a lawyer, Justice of the Peace, trustee of Warminister Academy, Vestryman of Rucker's Church, and member of the committee of safety of Amherst County. That committee was "composed of 21 of the most discreet, fit and able

men of the County."

Benjamin was a Captain in the Revolutionary War. His most important contribution was his part in the invention of the Tobacco Bateau. He had seven children, four of them sons who moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in the late 1790s and married four Reade sisters.

5. Anthony, the youngest son, and other inventor of the Tobacco Bateau, was a Captain in the Revolutionary War. He was the commissioner of Provision Law for Amherst in 1781 and became a tobacco inspector in 1792. His six children were Abner, Armistead, Absolem, Agnes, Ann, and Amelia.

Anthony Rucker's descendants still live on his original tract of land in Amherst County near Sweetbriar College.



AMBROSE RUCKER
AND HIS WIFE,
MARY TINSLEY,

OF AMHERST COUNTY, VIRGINIA

TOBACCO

The Early colonists who settled Virginia found a valuable money crop--Tobacco.

It took two years to plant and harvest a crop of tobacco. After it was cured, it was hauled to an official warehouse for inspection. A warehouse receipt was given showing the value of the tobacco. It then evolved that everything else became valued in pounds of tobacco.

The first settlers learned to grow tobacco from the Indians, but left out one vital ingredient--fertilizer. Every new crop had to be planted in new fields. But that was no problem as land was plentiful. The Planters gradually moved west to open new areas as the tidewater lands were used up.

Two problems were created with this western movement: 1. the time it took to seat a plantation and 2. the difficulty in getting the tobacco to the tidewater warehouses for inspection.

The Rev. Robert Rose, a minister, who had taken up lands in Amherst County adjacent to the five Rucker brothers, was important as he kept a diary which helps to answer some of our questions.

In 1747, Parson Rose wrote that his first tobacco crop was inspected, yielding the "first fruits of seven years of labor" after settling his plantation in Amherst County. We can assume that the Ruckers took a similar time to clear the forests and prepare their land for planting and harvesting the first tobacco crop.

The second problem, getting the tobacco to the tidewater inspection station, was more difficult to solve. Parson Rose and the Rucker brothers were instrumental in facilitating the route that tobacco took to get to market.

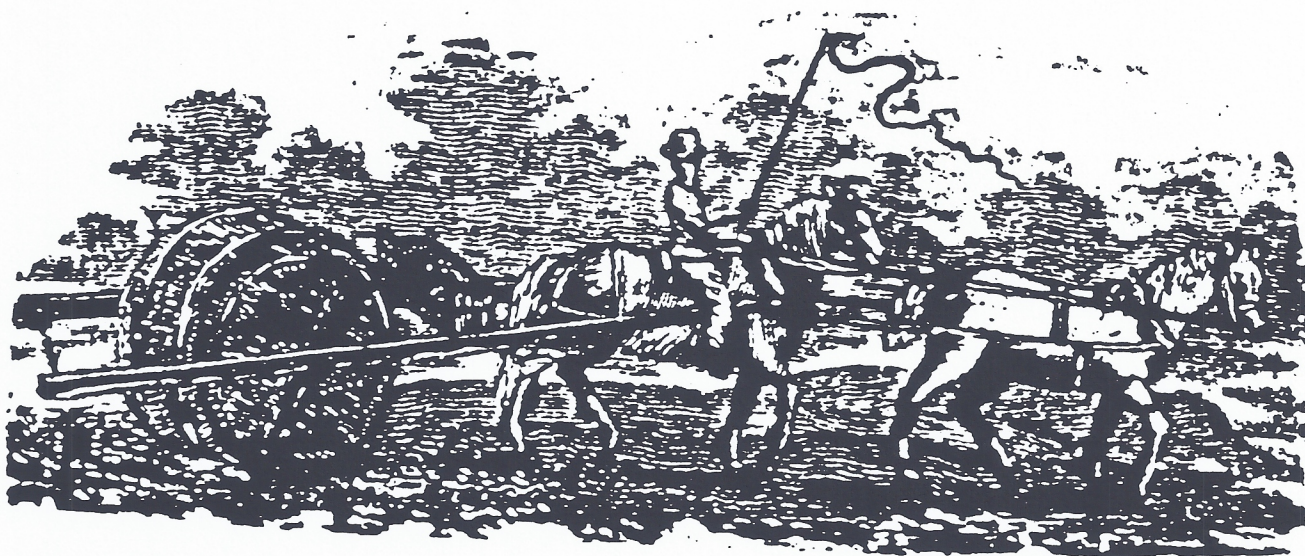
Up to that time tobacco was prized into large barrels called hogsheads and pulled by horses or oxen via "Rolling Roads" 150 miles to the tidewater area. A Rolling Road was a road cleared from a plantation for the purpose of "rolling" or pulling tobacco hogsheads to the tidewater warehouses. Horses or oxen were attached to the hogshead via a large axle which allowed it to roll like a wheel.

Each trip to market needed two animals and one man. If a farmer had 10 hogsheads, he either needed 20 animals and ten men or he needed to make 10 separate trips to the coast. The length of time it took valuable farmhands away from the plantation was a hardship for all involved. The long arduous journey took many weeks.

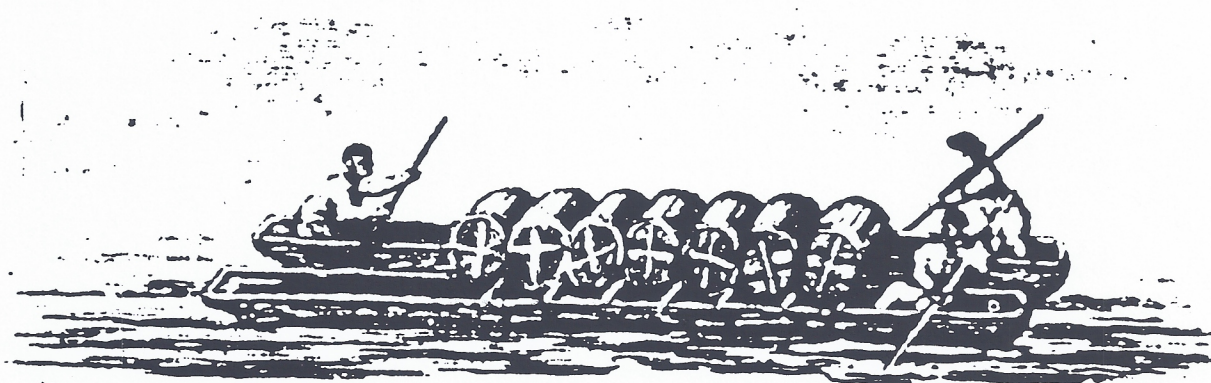
The quickest route to the coast was by the rivers. The only mode of travel in those rough waters was the dugout canoe, learned from the Indians. Some adventurous soles did use dugout canoes to float a hogshead or two down the river, but the danger of getting the tobacco wet was too great. The Rev. Robert Rose came up with the idea of lashing two dugout canoes together and mounting a platform that could hold 8 or 9 hogsheads of tobacco. This craft was steadier and the hogsheads were high out of the water safe from getting wet and being ruined. By this method a planter could get all his tobacco to market in one trip and in less time too.

In May of 1771 the most destructive flood of the settlers' memory descended and destroyed houses, orchards, animals, people, and most of the dugout canoes. These canoes were difficult and time consuming to replace.

This devastation created the need for a vehicle of navigation that could easily be mass produced. Anthony and Benjamin Rucker were the inventor of such a craft and called it the James River Batteaux.



HOGSHEAD "Rolling" to Market from Tatham's ESSAY ON
TOBACCO CULTURE, London, 1800



REV. ROBERT ROSE'S DOUBLE DUGOUT CANOE, from Tatham's
ESSAY ON TOBACCO CULTURE, London, 1800

THE JAMES RIVER BATEAUX

The James River Bateaux, also called Tobacco Bateaux, Market Boats, or in some cases, The Rucker Bateaux, were made from boards cut by water-powered saw mills. They were easily constructed so that many could be made to replace the lost dugout canoes.

Everyone was excited about the new water craft, especially Thomas Jefferson who was at the bateau's launching. Mr. Jefferson described the "Ruckers' Battoe" in his notes on April 29, 1775, as being 50 feet long, 4 feet wide at the bottom, and 6 feet wide at the top. It was able to carry 11 hogheads of tobacco and was shallow in the water only drawing $13\frac{1}{2}$ inches of water.

The bateau's ability to skim flat through the water was necessary to shoot through the rocks and rapids of the James River. It became popular very quickly.

The bateaux are described in a recent book by Alfred Percy, Tobacco Rolling Roads to Waterways, as having had platforms on each end. That way the boat could be loaded or steered from either end. When in place, the hogsheads were secured to a beam. Over each gunwale was a walkboard for a man on each side to pole the boat through the waters. A crew of three was needed, two to pole, one on each side of the bateau, and one to steer.

In 1821 Anthony and Benjamin Rucker decided to patent their invention. Everyone kept encouraging them to do so as the Tobacco Bateau was different from any other boat on the waters of America. The United States Patent Office granted the patent to Anthony's and Benjamin's heirs as they were both deceased by the time the patent was issued on April 3, 1821. Unfortunately all drawings and descriptions were destroyed in the Patent Office fire of 1847.

The issuing of the patent drew a storm of protest as the bateau had been used for so many years that people doubted the Ruckers' claim to the invention.

The Lynchburg Press of August 17, 1821, carried an article by Editor John H. Pleasants, stating that he had originally doubted the Ruckers' claim, but after careful study became convinced of their right. The article went on to say that Thomas Jefferson was

willing to testify to this effect as having been a witness at the original launching.

"By Gone Days" one hundred years later in 1921, reported the anniversary of the patent secured for Anthony and Benjamin Rucker.

The patent is also mentioned in Deed Book P, p.6, Amherst County, date 3 April 1821.

The Rucker Bateau was an improvement in the transportation system on the James and other rivers. It led to boat building as a separate industry in this inland country.

Improved water navigation led to the settlement and growth of towns along the waterways. It brought an influx of settlers into the Piedmont area now that the problem of marketing their produce had been solved. Lynchburg owes its growth to the increase of river navigation.

Now that the people had a better vessel to transport their goods, it became time to overcome natural obstacles in the river such as rapids and falls. To combat the rapids and rocks, sluice navigation was begun in 1796. A sluice is a place cut into the rocks creating a shoot for the water and boats to more easily traverse the treacherous waters.

Gallatin's Report for the year 1808 on roads and canals stated that the James River Sluice Navigation was one of the best internal improvements in the country.

The next step in improving water navigation was to build canals around the falls. The bateau men would no longer have to roll the hogsheads around the falls but could continue their journey through the newly built locks.

By 1830 there were 500 bateaux and 1500 men traveling between Lynchburg and Richmond. River navigation had reached its peak.

The bateau men created a culture as they traversed the rivers of Virginia. They camped at night on islands and cooked their meals over campfires with cast iron pots. After dinner in the evening, out would come fiddles and banjos and the singing and strumming would begin. "Juggity Jug" was sung making up new verses as they went along along with "I"se gwine down to Lynchburg town,

to git my 'bacca down."

Remains of the James River Bateaux and artifacts of river travel were found in the James River Canal basin dig in 1983/4. At long last we now know what a bateau looked like. The bateau Columbia was built as a replica of those early tobacco boats and last summer duplicated the long forgotten route of the early bateaux.

The bateaux invented by Anthony and Benjamin Rucker was important to the development of the piedmont area of Virginia. Bateaux travel was the forerunner of canal building and ^{was} the truck transportation of that day. We are indebted to those innovative Rucker Brothers for their quick thinking, creative idea that helped further the progress of America.



This steel engraving of a James River Bateau Camp from a sketch by Porte Crayon(D.H. Strother) in his book VIRGINIA ILLUSTRATED, Harpers N.Y., 1857.

1821. N. C. Dawson & A. Rucker,¹ Amherst Co. Improvement
in boats for rivers.

¹JAMES RIVER NAVIGATION.

The Lynchburg Press (John Hampden Pleasants), August 17, 1821, in discussing Anthony Rucker's patent, mentioned the objections of the paper to the patent laws as those laws were often made to work, but added that in this case it would seem that a patent was quite warranted. "Anthony Rucker was unquestionably," said *The Press*, "the inventor and original constructor of the James River Batteaux, a species of boat essentially different from any before that time used on the waters of America. Mr. Jefferson, we understand, is prepared to give his testimony in favor of the ancestor (Anthony Rucker, Sr.) of the patentees, and it is said was a spectator of the launch of the first boat of the kind ever used on James River, and which occurred somewhere in Albemarle."

That is to say, the patent to N. C. Dawson and A. Rucker, of Pedlar's Mills, Amherst County, April 3, 1821, was possibly [like so many patents] in litigation very soon after issuance. It may be that Anthony Rucker, Jr., and N. C. Dawson thought it well in 1821 to patent the device of Anthony Rucker, Sr. And it may be that the elder Rucker's boats were those that Isaac Weld [*Travels Through the United States of North America*, &c] saw at Lynchburg in 1796—"boats in which produce is conveyed down the river are from forty-eight to fifty-four feet long, but very narrow in proportion to their length. Three men are sufficient to navigate one of these boats, and they can go to Richmond and back in ten days. They fall down with the stream, but work their way back again with poles."

At any rate, it seems likely that the Rose and Rucker methods were the improved methods of getting down James River from Albemarle before the coming of the canal. James Maury, Thomas Jefferson's teacher, explained the Rose method in 1756, and registered the name of the inventor, that remarkable man Robert Rose, minister of St. Anne's Parish, Albemarle, who died in 1751. Mr. Maury, minister of Fredericksville Parish, Louisa, was no less remarkable, as the whole of this letter, treating of the navigation of our western waters, gives proof. Mr. Maury said, writing from Louisa January 10, 1756 (see *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family*):

"Although one single canoe will carry but a small weight, yet nothing is more common than to see two of these tottering vehicles, when lashed together side by side with cords, or any other strong bandages, carrying down our upland streams eight or nine heavy hogsheads of tobacco at a time to the warehouse, rolled on their gunwales crossways, and secured against moving fore or aft by a small piece of wood drove under the bilge of the two extreme hogsheads; an almost incredible weight for such slender embarkations. But as they will bear such a burden, their slender contexture is an advantage; they draw but few inches water, move down a current with great velocity, and leave the waterman nothing but Palinurus's task to perform when going downwards, and when they return two men will shove the canoes with poles as far against stream in one day as four brisk watermen with oars can a boat that will carry the same burden, in two days. For this great improvement of inland navigation we mountaineers are indebted to the late Reverend and ingenious Mr. Rose." (See also Brown, *Cabells and Their Kin*, 51, 215.)

MAP OF VIRGINIA SHOWING RUCKER'S LAND

